Religion and nature scholar Bron Taylor names and describes “dark green religion” in a recent volume. He illustrates it as being like a phantom. It is “unnamed and has no institutions officially devoted to its promotion; no single sacred text that its devotees can plant in hotel rooms in hopes of reaping a future harvest of souls; no identified religious hierarchy or charismatic figure responsible for spreading the faith, ministering to the faithful, or practicing its rituals.”¹ And yet there are charismatic figures and growing institutions who view dark green religion as offering salvation, there are texts that are gaining “sacred” status among the faithful, and there are figures and organizations championing the globalization of the gospel of dark green religion.

The gospel of dark green religion, among other things, sees nature as sacred, interconnected to all things, and full of inherent value. The ethical responsibility for earth, therefore, lies with humanity. It is part of the biosphere that we are to love and care for. The entire cosmos deserves an essential measure of reverence.² The growth in the ideas and ideals of dark green religion are becoming prevalent factors in determining the worldviews and actions of groups and individuals, right from the grassroots through to the political sphere. This is cause for excitement or concern, depending on one’s perspective.³

In this current climate of increasing concern about the health of the planet, how does the Christian faith, with particular focus on those within the Wesleyan Tradition, encounter and relate to those who would see themselves belonging to this nebulous and yet global religious crowd? What affinities, connections and understandings might there be? Indeed,

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²Ibid.
³Ibid, x.
are there any among the broadly Wesleyan company that would see themselves and their faith entwined with dark green religion? What might this mean for the Christian faith in light of the potential emergence of a global, civic earth religion? I will aim to briefly review this dark green religion, trace obstacles to creation care within the broadly Wesleyan sphere, begin to uncover possible Wesleyan harmonies and dissonances that may arise or have already arisen, and suggest an enhancement of the Wesleyan “quadrilateral.”

What is Dark Green Religion?

Bron Taylor argues that “the heart of dark green religion is to be found in the belief that everything in the biosphere is interdependent, intrinsically valuable, and sacred.”4 There is a “central affective feeling and ethical sensibility present in dark green religion—a feeling of belonging to nature and kinship with its diverse life forms, and a corresponding sense of responsibility for their well-being.”5 Not only are there elements of emotional attachment and related ethical sensibilities; there is the basis for a religious system already evident. Paul Watson, the cofounder of Greenpeace and the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, asserts that “religions are based on rules, and we already have the rules in place for the establishment of a religion based on nature.”6 The rules he links with this nature religion are the basic laws of ecology, namely:

1. The Law of Diversity. The strength of an ecosystem is dependent upon its diversity. The greatest current threat to the planet’s living species;
2. The Law of Interdependence. All species are interdependent upon each other;
3. The Law of Finite Resources. There are limits to growth in every species because there are limits to the carrying capacity of every ecosystem;
4. The Law that a Species must have Precedence over the interests of any individual . . . this means the right of a species to survive must take precedence over the right of any individual or group to exploit that species.7

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5Ibid, 83.
6Ibid, 99.
7Ibid.
Taylor argues that dark green religion possesses many characteristics of other established religions. These characteristics include:

- Sacred texts (books such as *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau and *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold);
- Rituals ("soul surfers" meeting the ocean at dawn);
- Prophets (writers and activists such as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir and Rachael Carson);
- Sacred places. While all of nature would be considered sacred, certain places appear to be pre-eminent for a number of significant figures.
- Dark green religion includes elements that some consider dangerous (radical "eco-terrorists");
- Dark green religion has an inherently political component, particularly in regards to environmentalism;
- There are inherent ethical and moral responsibilities;
- Apocalypticism. Taylor asserts that environmental apocalypticism is in one way different and even innovative—"this is the first time that an expectation of the end of the known world has been grounded in environmental science."8
- There is also one frequent characteristic that should cause us as Wesleyans, and more broadly Christians, some concern. This common critique centers on the separation of humanity from nature stemming from the anthropocentricity of Abrahamic religions.9

Thirty years before Lynn White’s famous article "The Historic Roots of our Ecologic Crisis" was published,10 Aldo Leopold, considered as a leading ecologist and environmental ethicist of the twentieth century, asserted that “conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it

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9Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 75.

10Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155(3767), 1967: 1203-1207. White argues the Christian tradition has brought about an incorrect view of power and superiority of humanity on earth which has in turn been a primary driver of environmental degradation.
as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”\textsuperscript{11} The view that Christianity has passed its use by date, or is no longer a positive worldview, appears to be a commonality from many voices within the dark green movement. Christianity, with its resistance to worshipping the creation and not the Creator, is said to sometimes implicitly advocate the destruction of the creation.\textsuperscript{12} By contrast, the new biocentric “religion” is experiential and existential nature, claiming “that we can know the creation; we can see it, hear it, smell it, feel it and experience it. We can [and should] nurture and protect it.”\textsuperscript{13}

In expounding the experience of lived biocentric religion, the “anthropocentric” idea of custodianship of the earth is rejected. This idea conveys human superiority, and humans have a terrible history of being custodians. In response to humanity’s apparent lack of qualifications, Paul Hawken brings an interesting slant to the conversation. He says, “It has been said that we cannot save our planet unless humankind undergoes a widespread spiritual and religious awakening.”\textsuperscript{14} He then asks, “would we recognize a worldwide spiritual awakening if we saw one? . . . What if there is already in place a large-scale awakening and we are simply not recognizing it?”\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Christianity, the Wesleyan Tradition, and Ecology}\textsuperscript{16}

Norman Habel suggests that Christian mission has over time progressively encompassed three elements, all applicable and relevant to the Wesleyan context. Habel’s first element involves mission focused primarily on the saving of souls. The second broadens the idea of mission and includes

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{11}Aldo Leopold, \textit{A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There} (New York: Oxford University, 1989 [1949]): vii.
  \item \textsuperscript{12}Taylor, \textit{Dark Green Religion}, 99.
  \item \textsuperscript{13}Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{15}Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{16}Portions of this section have been reworked from a paper presented at the Australasian Centre for Wesleyan Research conference “\textit{Being Open to God’s Freedom: Wesleyan Roots and Contemporary Relevance},” 6th August, 2011, published as Matthew Seaman, “\textit{Red, Yellow, Blue, and Green: Eco-Theology Within The Salvation Army},” \textit{Aldersgate Papers}, 9 (2011), 48-66.
\end{itemize}
bodily and community-focused therapeutic evangelism (social justice). The third, and broadest sense of mission, takes the whole of creation as the focus of salvation, redemption and healing.\textsuperscript{17}

Historically, the Wesleyan tradition has certainly focused on the first two elements: salvation of humanity, with a particular focus on those experiencing suffering, poverty and hopelessness. It can be argued that the focus on these first two elements has sidelined a broader discourse around the value and care of non-human nature, with this focus breeding especially well within evangelical theology and mission. Ross Langmead posits five reasons for this:

1. Evangelical views of the gospel are almost exclusively centred on the personal salvation of humans;
2. God’s transcendence tends to be over emphasized;
3. Evangelicals tend to emphasize the historical Jesus and his atoning work at the expense of Christ the cosmic creator;
4. Evangelicals often hold to an apocalyptic and other worldly hope for the future;
5. Many evangelicals believe that reality is divided into spirit, which is ultimately real, and physical matter, which is relatively unimportant and perhaps even sinful.\textsuperscript{18}

In addition, J. A. Simmons condenses Calvin DeWitt’s ten main evangelical environmental stumbling blocks into three categories:

First, there is a worry about the apparently inevitable slide towards liberal political positions that accompany environmental sensibilities. . . . Second, there is a worry about theological heresies, in particular what is often referred to as “pantheism” and “new age spirituality,” which accompany so much of secular envi-


ronmental positions. . . . Third, there exists a particular eschatological vision (popular among some evangelicals) that supposedly makes environmental concerns really quite irrelevant.19

These various stumbling blocks to evangelical environmentalism reflect, to some extent, the rich Christian ecological literary landscape, in that there are widely divergent views.20 Indeed, Langmead’s review of articles focused on the “greening of mission” in an evangelical Christian context claims there is a fairly common thread. This commonality appears to be a need to “justify the legitimacy of creation care theology” in light of its comparatively recent recognition as a significant topic within evangelicalism.21 More broadly underscoring this somewhat ambiguous relationship between environmentalism and religiosity, Lieberman’s survey of quantitative studies of the effects of religious factors on environmental variables concludes that it is not a simple task to construct solid conclusions regarding the relationship between religiosity and environmentalism.22

Some challenges to Wesleyan (and broadly speaking, Christian) eco-mission can be seen clearly in the problem of widespread environmental degradation. It is not hard to see the complexity and divergence in values within the rhetoric surrounding the heavily politicized areas of anthropogenic climate change and, in Australia, the carbon price debate. The divergent values and beliefs can make available options seem unclear, difficult, and they even present practical realities for various Wesleyan missions. Major contentions against eco-mission may also emerge through popular eschatological resistance to the idea of creation care, influenced to some extent by prosperity theology and the “Left Behind” style of dispensationalism.23

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21Ross Langmead, “Integrating Ecological Mission into Mainstream Mission: Can it be Done?” A paper delivered at the conference of the Australian Association for Mission Studies (AAMS), Sydney, 22 to 25, September 2011.
Some conclude that “theological fundamentalism versus liberalism is the strongest religious independent variable for predicting environmentalism.” From a 1993 study, it appears that Evangelicals were the least environmental, Protestants somewhat greener, and Catholics the greenest. The negative correlation between fundamentalism and environmentalism stems from the factors of “dispensationalism, end-times ideology, and pessimism about the possibility of reform.” Langmead suggests two more potential reasons for negative correlation: “Evangelicals often fail to pursue ecojustice. . .because of fear that it might lead to New Age thinking [and] evangelical activism tends to distract Christians from the full enjoyment of creation which would foster a pursuit of ecojustice.” Dark green religion in many settings would fall into this category of “New Age” thinking, with notions such as Gaia and Mother Earth, resurgence in neo-pagan and shamanic rituals and texts, and other related activities.

There certainly are a number of deep-seated issues involved in declaring harmony between dark green religiosity and the Wesleyan tradition. However, I will argue that it is of great benefit to explore this sometimes mysterious and fluid space. Practical Wesleyan theological work would do well to identify related Christian themes within dark green religion. This would move us further toward empathy, understanding, holistic evangelical and healing, and Christ-focused mission. Identifying affinities that bridge the divide shows love toward the “other,” bringing with it constructive and positive critique for both dark green religion and the Christian faith. There must always be, however, a pointing back to the divine source of all creation.

David Bookless agrees and calls for evangelicalism to broaden the outlook of God’s purposes beyond human salvation or welfare. He suggests that “evangelicalism has largely failed to be fully biblical, cross-centred, conversionist or activist in engaging with the non-human environment.” If the evangelical values of biblicism, crucicentrism, convers-

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
29 Ibid, 38.
sionism and activism “are rediscovered and applied to the environmental crisis, this approach to the gospel and to mission can offer a distinctive and valuable contribution to the current difficulties faced by the environmental movement, and to a world often paralysed by lethargy or fear.”

There are great strengths that the Wesleyan tradition could and should bring to the current environmental crisis.

Wesleyan Harmony and Dissonance

The conjunctive (both/and) rather than (either/or) pattern that Albert Outler noted in Wesley’s theology is certainly helpful in bridging the dark green divide. Rather than immediately dismissing the claims, beliefs and actions of the dark green crowd, Wesley would be keen to identify related Christian themes within dark green religion which could critique both dark green religion and the Christian faith, while always pointing back to the source of all creation. As an initial indication of potential affinities, Kenneth Collin’s helpful list of “10 Things You’ll Love about Wesley,” will be the lens through which I gather a sense of some points of harmony and dissonance between the Wesleyan and Dark Green traditions.

1. Wesley had an egalitarian spirit (at least sometimes). Wesley’s main focus was certainly on equality among humans; however, this can be extended to all creatures and potentially all of earth. Michael Lodahl argues that “Wesley explicitly denied that [at least some] eschatological promises are addressed only to human beings, for there is no restriction in the text,” and that “Wesley finds nothing inherently distinctive about human beings; rather, it is the relation toward God for which the human creature is made, the telos towards which we are called, that marks our unique place in God’s creation.” Therefore, we see signs of Wesley breaking down anthropocentrism. While seemingly innate within us, it can be tempered towards biocentrism—humans are not separate from nature.

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33 Ibid.
2. Wesley was a true contemplative. To be aware, and increasingly so, of the Creator in the mundane, in the day to day activities of life, is an important part of becoming ecologically mindful, and is a God-honoring discipline. The more we are aware of how we use and sometimes abuse the created gifts we have, the more opportunity we have to then consider our options, repent and turn towards joining in the healing of creation. In this process, pride and anthropocentric thoughts and actions could give way to humility and care for the biosphere.

3. Wesley loved the poor and was generous. It is generally accepted that the world’s poorest—those who are least able to prepare, move or adapt, will bear the greatest impact of increasing climatic variation. We have a responsibility to love the poor and not contribute to any further distress, pain and suffering due to our excesses. This is where the links between social-justice and environmental justice are clearly seen. For Wesleyans, to unite the passion for social justice with eco-justice, and recognize that their causes are mutually dependent, is a crucial step in bridging the dark green religious divide, and also an increasingly important step in our social justice agenda of being Christ’s ambassadors to a hurting world.

4. Wesley rejected “cheap grace.” Wesley speaks against “practical antinomianism,” leaving people in a state of sin/bondage. Where is the bondage today? The attitudes that keep many in bondage (pride, selfishness, greed, focus on “things,” and having more “things”) enhance environmental crises. The fervent calls from many sectors to increase economic growth at the expense of God’s creation can wash away the promises of the land “flowing with milk and honey.”

5. Wesley was socially and politically concerned. Wesley wrote several political tracts, ‘Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions’ among them. He believed that the rich were cheating the poor by their over-indulgence and consumption. This is certainly still the case economically, and we are now seeing the environmental outcomes of the rich cheating the poor.

6. Wesley loved God with all his heart. Kenneth Collins states that in Wesley the highest graces were evidenced in a life

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34 Ibid.
of service and love, primarily to God and also to one’s neighbor. Who is our neighbor? Does our neighbor depend on certain ecosystems that are being ravaged by coal seam gas exploration and extraction, mining, or corporate greed? The journey towards holy love and responsible grace could be strengthened by increased focus on ecological care and humility.

Marc Otto and Michael Lodahl locate three main themes in Wesley’s Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation, two of which are particularly useful here to bring us closer in communion with the Creator of all: (1) We need to be constantly aware of the limits of human knowledge—humility is key. (2) To be aware of God’s call, through God’s creation, to wonder and worship.

A Helpful Variant of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral

David McEwan argues there is extensive agreement within current Wesleyan scholarship that Wesley did use Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience in the development and maturing of his theology. There are, however, outspoken critics, some calling for the whole model to be abandoned. Some still see value in the model and would prefer additional elements in it. Randy Maddox maintains that Wesley’s “theological authorities could more adequately be described as a unilateral rule of Scripture within a trilateral hermeneutic of reason, tradition, and experience.”

I have taken note of de Souza and Snyder’s separate yet related identification of creation as a descriptor which fits in the Christian con-
text of seeing all matter as created by God, and thus as an important factor in doing theology. The resulting “pentalateral” model is seen as a “unilateral or central rule of Scripture within a quadrilateral of creation, reason, tradition and experience.” McEwan’s valuable contribution to updating the Wesleyan model brings a more fluid and “postmodern” description, which situates Wesley’s theological method as a “dynamic, neural network, with the four elements as the critical interlinked nodes, with the whole energised by the presence of the Spirit.”

Through the dynamic work of the Spirit, creation assists in informing and illuminating the four interrelated sources or nodes of scripture, reason, experience and tradition. This may be a debateable and problematic concept to some; however I would argue that all experience, reason, tradition and scriptures are mediated from God through creation. McEwan helpfully states: “The Spirit utilises the network differently for working with the doctrinal substance and then the experiential circumstance of Christian perfection.” This model helps to gain insight into the various ways significance is applied or understood to certain nodes, and how giving more weight to certain elements in the system can of impact the holistic view of the network within which we all “live and move and have our being.”

Paul Watson’s quote from John Muir is fitting: “When you tug on any part of the planet, you will find it intimately connected to every other part of the planet.” We individually impact each other with certain significance, actions, and understandings. Our actions, based on our own perceptions derived from the various network node and connection weightings, can influence others and the creation for or against God’s glory.

Conclusion

In looking forward to increased ecological concern within Wesleyan traditions, and countering previously mentioned suggestions about why evangelicals may be unenthusiastic about environmental issues, Langmead offers seven helpful responses:

1. A cosmic view of salvation will balance the human-centred soteriology of many evangelicals.

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41 Ibid., 20.
42 David McEwan, An Examination of How John Wesley’s Theological Methodology Functions, 4.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
2. An understanding of God as both transcendent and immanent . . . will restore a lively sense of God’s intimate involvement with creation.

3. A broader view of the atonement which links the redeeming work of Christ to his role as the creative and originating Divine Word will hold together creation and redemption more easily.

4. A stronger affirmation of the value of this world to God, as demonstrated in the incarnation, will offset and balance the otherworldly hopes so common in evangelical thinking.

5. An affirmation of the goodness of the material world, and even better, new integrated ways of conceiving the relationship of spirit and matter, will overcome the destructive dualism of spirit and matter.

6. A willingness to work with others of like mind is needed to overcome the fear of the New Age.

7. Finally, a healthy sense of wonder and grace that may allow a livelier relationship with creation which will nourish the pursuit of ecojustice.45

As a fine example of recent movements in this direction by a member of the Wesleyan family, the Ethics Centre for the Canada and Bermuda Territory of the Salvation Army has produced a “Position Statement on Responsibility for the Earth.”46 The statement contains valuable biblical insights and is forward looking in its approach to the current state of God’s creation. I take the liberty to include it in full:

The earth is an interconnected whole, each part interdependent. As an intricately ordered system it must be kept in careful balance. Human sinfulness continues to contribute to destruction of the earth and cause significant degradations: increased global temperature, unnatural changes to biodiversity, air and water pollution, ozone depletion, land and habitat destruction. These imbalances have consequences for the poor,

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45 Langmead, *Ecojustice Principles: Challenges for the Evangelical Perspective*, 169-170. For further reading on these topics, I refer again to Lodahl’s wonderful book which touches on many of these points from a Wesleyan perspective: *God of Nature and of Grace: Reading the World in a Wesleyan Way*.

our global neighbours and future generations, as more and more people are unable to meet their basic human needs. Environmental concerns are part of the broader reality of injustice and economic inequity in our world. Individuals, communities, religious organizations, businesses and governments must work to change this.

The Salvation Army believes that God created the earth and all living things. We believe that God delights in each part of creation and fills it with intrinsic value, regardless of its utility. As such, caring for creation is an act of worship to God, while neglecting or abusing it is an act of disobedience.

The Salvation Army believes that degradation of the earth is in part the result of human activity which has not adhered to the rhythms and regulations of biblical stewardship. We believe that human beings, created in the image of God, have a responsibility to care for all living things in a manner that reflects God's own relationship to creation.

Humans are called to careful stewardship of the earth and its resources. The call to stewardship must be seen as an invitation to inhabit God's garden, to tend to this bountiful planet, care for it and help it to flourish, joining with all creation in witnessing to God's glory. Proper stewardship ought to follow Christ's pattern of humility, service and sacrifice in the world.

The Salvation Army anticipates the day when God will make broken creation whole again, redeeming all created things and renewing the earth. However, this does not absolve us of the responsibility to be good earth-keepers. We believe that good earth-keeping is essential to the Christian faith. Salvationists as individuals and The Salvation Army as an organization resolve to accept responsibility for this world we live in by taking practical steps to conserve and regenerate creation.

As Taylor posits, Is Dark Green Religion a phantom? Is it a holy phantom? Is it a stirring for all of us to join together in becoming more responsible, full of grace and love, and thereby caring more deeply for all of God's creation? Taylor would see this movement as a new religion. I hope that this dark green movement may help us, the church, to recapture the fuller, more holistic nature of the Christian faith, bringing with it holiness, healing, and love to those who would otherwise be antagonistic toward the prevenient grace of the Creator. While there are numerous economic, political, theological, cultural, social and individual barriers, there is hope.
Michael Lodahl informs us that one Wesleyan hymn was initially titled “Grace before Meat.” It embraces the “affirmation of the sacramental character of our creaturely relations and experiences,” and it shares hope that the current ecological crises can provide a way forward in humility, a way toward caring for all of God’s loved creation.

Turn the full stream of nature’s tide;
Let all our actions tend
To Thee their source; thy love the guide,
Thy glory be the end.

Earth then a scale to heaven shall be,
Sense shall point out the road;
The creatures all shall lead to thee;
And all we taste be God.

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