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Module code: HPCA7023 Module title: Ecology and Spirituality	Student ID number: 2116816	Educational support needs: Yes/No
Module tutor: Dr Jack Hunter		
Assignment due date: 17 th November 2021		
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Assignment 1: A Critical Comparison of Two Secondary Sources.

Val Plumwood and Bron Taylor are both key names in any discussion of the study of ecology and culture. Plumwood is well known for her part in the debate that eventually gave rise to the deep ecology movement in the 1970s¹, and for his part Taylor is well known for coining the phrase 'Dark Green Religion', describing it as religion 'in which nature is sacred, has intrinsic value, and is therefore due reverent care'². Both are widely influential in their fields, and it is therefore interesting to compare how they wrote and why. This essay is a critical comparison of Bron Taylor's paper, 'The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One): From Lynn White, Jr and Claims That Religions Can Promote Environmentally Destructive Attitudes and Behaviors to Assertions They Are Becoming Environmentally Friendly' published in the 'Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture' in 2016³, with Val Plumwood's chapter on 'Gender, Eco-Feminism and The Environment' in 'Controversies in Environmental Sociology', edited by Rob White in 2004⁴. This essay will give brief contexts to both authors and their work, and a very brief summary of the papers above, before comparing and contrasting their different approaches.

Bron Taylor is a core faculty member in the University of Florida's Graduate Program in Religion and Nature and is known for work focussing on environmental movements and their political, ethical, emotional, and spiritual aspects. He is widely published and as mentioned above coined the well-known phrase 'Dark Green Religion', Taylor's 2016 paper was published as part of a special issue of 'The Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture' (JSRNC) examining the role and impact that religions and their leaders have in influencing their community's attitudes about the growing environmental crisis. Effectively it is the literature review for a second collaborative study published in the same edition of the JSRNC authored by Taylor, Gretel Van Wieren and Bernard Zaleha (2016)⁵. Taylor's paper charts the spiritual landscape of the ecology movement from what he considers to be its earliest roots and describes how these influenced and informed Lynn White, Jr's seminal 1967 paper ('The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis'⁶). Taylor goes on to explore both the impact that White's paper has had on the ecological and religious (particularly Christian) world views which have come to shape what might be called a 'Western' world view of nature and the environment, and how this world view has shifted in the years since its publication.

Val Plumwood (1939-2008) was a member of a group of philosophers from the Australian National University who were influential in the development of what became known as the Deep Ecology movement⁷. She famously survived an alligator attack in 1985, an event that deeply influenced her thinking about humanity as 'ecological beings.....embedded in an ecosystem' (National Museum of Australia n.d.)⁸. Her chapter in the textbook 'Controversies in Environmental

¹ Freya Mathews. 2008. 'Obituary: Val Plumwood: Australian philosopher devoted to an ethic that regarded people as part of nature', The Guardian (London), Mar 26,: 32

² Taylor, Bron. 2010. Dark green religion: nature spirituality and the planetary future. Berkeley: University of California Press. doi:10.1525/j.ctt1ppt59

³ Taylor, Bron. 2016. "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One): From Lynn White, Jr and Claims That Religions Can Promote Environmentally Destructive Attitudes and Behaviors to Assertions They Are Becoming Environmentally Friendly." The Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture 268-305.

⁴ Plumwood, Val. 2004. "Gender, Eco-Feminism and the Environment." Chap. 3 in Controversies in Environmental Sociology, edited by Rob White, 43-60. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Taylor, Bron, Gretel Van Wieren, and Bernard Zaleha. 2016. "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part Two): Assessing the Data from Lynn White, Jr, to Pope Francis." Journal for the study of religion, nature and culture 306-378.

⁶ White, L. 1967. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." Science 155: 1203-7.

⁷ Mathews, 2008, p. 32

⁸ National Museum of Australia. n.d. Val Plumwood canoe. Accessed Nov 10, 2021. <https://www.nma.gov.au/explore/collection/highlights/val-plumwood-canoe>.

Sociology'⁹ explores how feminist thought has impacted the ecological movement, and how, *visa-versa*, the ecological movement has impacted feminist thought. The book is an introduction to the various views and debates within in the environmental sociology field and aims to 'open up further conceptual, empirical and action-oriented possibilities.'¹⁰ Plumwood's chapter, therefore, examines Eco-Feminism as one of the many streams of thought and approaches that are being brought into play to explore how society can understand the environment and respond to the ecological crisis that human societies have caused. Plumwood explores the dualisms that are at the heart of the Western cultural background and outlines the various eco-feminist responses and debates that have challenged it. In her chapter she argues for a 'Critical Eco-Feminism' that confronts the highly dualistic nature of Western thinking about human and non-human worlds, arguing for a wider view that resituates 'humans in ecological terms and non-humans in ethical terms'¹¹ than the debate has so far allowed.

At first reading both texts seem quite different and deal with apparently different areas of the ecological debate, yet structurally they are similar. Both authors begin by outlining in quite simple terms what they see as the aim of their paper, reviewing the philosophical context of their subject, before making the case for their preferred interpretation of the ecological debate, finally outlining the questions that still need to be asked and answered. In Plumwood's case this focusses on a brief overview of why there is a need for Eco-feminism in the first place ('sexism in the green movement and a lack of ecological consciousness in the women's movement'¹²) before exploring what she believes to be the deeper roots of both problems. In doing this Plumwood identifies a 'culture/nature (or human/nature) [hyper] dualism'¹³ which she believes is 'the key to the ecological failings of western culture'¹⁴. She argues that the roots of this dualism can be found in the ancient world of the Greeks, were inherited by the Christian world, and then passed on to the modern scientific culture. To finish she reframes both the feminist issues and the ecological issues as dualisms than need breaking down. Essentially, she says that feminist and ecological issues are the same issue as seen from different perspectives and that the focus of the eco-feminists on a much broader understanding of our environmental problems will be of benefit to the whole human and non-human ecosystem.

Similarly, Taylor focuses in on his main theme, the 1967 paper by Lynn White, Jr, explaining what he believes to be its main thesis, ('the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not'¹⁵), before zooming out to look at the paper in the context of what came both before and after it. Taylor sets White's paper at the centre of the ecological debate, showing that whilst White's thoughts were not especially new (Taylor cites influences from ancient Greek poetry through to the present day), their publication in the journal *Science* gave them a much wider reach than any who had come before him¹⁶. As such they allowed what might be termed a generational pivot in thinking, in both ecological thought and in Western Christian and other religious faith traditions. Taylor finishes his paper by describing how Western Christian and other ecumenical faith efforts have begun to 'Green' their theology and frames a number of questions that he hopes will be answered in the second part of his paper.^{17 18}

⁹ Plumwood, p. 43-60

¹⁰ White, Rob. 2004. "Introduction - Sociology, Society and the Environment." In *Controversies in Environmental Sociology*, edited by Rob White, 1-7. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹¹ Plumwood, p. 57.

¹² Plumwood, p. 43

¹³ Ibid. p. 44

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 44

¹⁵ White, 1967 p. 1207

¹⁶ Taylor, 2016 p. 277

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 296-297

¹⁸ Taylor *et al.* 2016

Another similarity in both papers is their purpose. Both Plumwood and Taylor aim to review the background to their field, backing up their ideas as they review the thought landscape. For Taylor this means an in-depth literature review examining the philosophical background to Lynn White's paper. As he does this Taylor builds on White's foundational idea (religion is the problem¹⁹), citing a range of authors from the Epicurean poet, Titus Lucretius Carus, to the eighteenth and nineteenth century philosophers, David Hume, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson (amongst others), before transitioning to view how those Western religions have responded to Lynn White's critique²⁰. By contrast, Val Plumwood uses her chapter primarily to review eco-feminist thought describing how dualistic thinking about male/female and human/nature have been connected conceptually by scholars such as Ruether and Merchant, recognising that Western culture has equated maleness and humanness as 'higher', and femaleness and nature as 'lower'²¹. From this beginning Plumwood describes where these thought patterns originate, and reviews how different authors have characterised, critiqued, and addressed the dualistic problems faced by women and the ecological world, establishing what she believes is the need for a critical eco-feminist approach²². Finally, Plumwood uses this critical eco-feminist approach to demonstrate how this oppositional method works, closely critiquing what she calls Ontological Veganism²³. It is interesting to note how these two approaches to the same task contrast with each other. Both authors review the academic context of their field, but Taylor does so painstakingly, referencing every thought and viewpoint. In contrast Plumwood writes much more freely citing the key ideas and their sources, but overall, citing far fewer authors in a much less exacting manner.

The final similarity between Taylor and Plumwood's papers is the extent to which both appear biased in their treatment of their subject matter. Plumwood uses her platform in Ch 3 of *Controversies in Environmental Sociology* to not only review the source of the dualisms that she believes are at the heart of feminist and ecological problems but then goes to considerable lengths to promote an approach she calls Critical Eco-Feminism that she contends emerges oppositionally to other feminisms as their flaws in debate are revealed²⁴. She employs a similar approach in the ecological debate, highlighting two philosophies that she says mirror the feminism debates, 'Ontological Veganism and Ecological Animalism'²⁵. She then spends 5 pages²⁶ explaining Ontological veganism (a theory that all consumers should abstain from all animal products as the only alternative to factory farming of animals²⁷) and then minutely critiquing it as a viable eco-feminist approach.

Similarly, Taylor spends 13 pages²⁸ critiquing the role of (Christian) religion as a key cause of the environmental crisis. Startlingly, neither author allows for much if any critique of their preferred position. Plumwood uses most of her citations to critique the Ontological Veganism position whilst offering no citations to back up her Ecological Animalism position. Taylor deploys his citations extensively in defence of White's thesis (Western [Christian] religion is the problem) and cites several authors who uncritically advocate eastern and indigenous religions as the answer to 'the problem'²⁹ without attempting to critique their positions.

¹⁹ White, 1967 p. 1207

²⁰ Taylor, p. 289-296

²¹ Plumwood, p. 43

²² Ibid. p. 43-49

²³ Ibid. p. 51-55

²⁴ Ibid. p. 46-49

²⁵ Ibid. p. 52

²⁶ Ibid. p. 51-55

²⁷ Ibid. p. 52

²⁸ Taylor, 2016, p. 277-285, 286-289

²⁹ Ibid. p. 288-289

Whilst both authors clearly have their biases, it is Plumwood who appears the more diminished by it. Her intensely one-sided critique of Ontological Veganism is unbalanced and does not enhance her advocacy for her Ecological Animalism position. By contrast, Taylor's bias, appears less unbalanced since he goes on to describe efforts lead variously by the World Council of Churches, Christian denominations, Western establishment figures, and ecumenical faith leaders 'who have tirelessly laboured to promote a greening of the world religions'^{30 31}.

As stated above, both papers are review papers, although with slightly different aims. Taylor's paper is a comprehensive literature review that builds the case for the follow up study³² in the special edition of the JSRNC in which both papers are published. To do this Taylor leans extensively on his citations, footnotes, and bibliography to back up his claims and make his case (nearly 200 citations³³). In contrast, Plumwood's chapter reviews her field using relatively few citations and references (33 citations³⁴) leaning instead on Plumwood's own knowledge and reputation for its authority. These differences have several effects. The long bibliography cited by Taylor and his many footnotes gives his work a sense of authority and comprehensiveness, making it easier to give credence to his logic and conclusions. It also means that having established such an apparently weighty intellectual case against Western Christian thought, he appears more open minded and generous towards these worldviews when he considers how they have responded to White's critique in the years since 1967. Unfortunately, the use of lots of citations and footnotes makes the paper a little difficult and ponderous to read, especially for new students of the field. In contrast Val Plumwood's lighter use of citations in her chapter makes the text easier for new students to read because they are not constantly having to deal with parenthesis, footnotes or citations. It makes the chapter less challenging to read and much more approachable for new students. Interestingly however, because of this, the chapter reads more like a polemic against Ontological Veganism, than the review of ecological socialism that the book's editor stated as one of his aims in the books' introduction³⁵.

Another contrast between these two papers is the aim of the places in which they are published. Plumwood's chapter is part of a collection of essays designed to demonstrate the breadth of debate and controversy in the academic field of environmental sociology. In the introduction to the book, the editor, Rob White states that he hopes the book will be 'an introduction to environmental sociology, and [it will] do so by providing an overview of key controversies within the field.'³⁶ As a result Plumwood deliberately writes to provoke a response. Her strongly polemic style, highlights the weaknesses of her opponents' point of view by the use of citations, whilst relying on her own words to promote her own viewpoint. This is a subtle manipulation of the evidence since it gives the reader the impression that only Ontological Veganism has been or can be critiqued, whilst Ecological Animalism might be above critique. In contrast Taylor's paper was published as part of a special edition of the Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture³⁷ and as such is part of scholarly efforts to answer questions about both the extent that a religious leader influences those in their congregation, 'and about the relative importance of religion when entangled with economic, political, and social variables'³⁸ Taylor is therefore writing for a different audience than Plumwood, and so his language and his style are quite different, relying on citations and their chronology to carry the reader with him to a conclusion. By necessity, even though Taylor appears to strongly

³⁰ Ibid. p. 289-296

³¹ Ibid. p.293

³² Taylor *et al.* 2016

³³ Taylor, 2016, p. 298-305

³⁴ Plumwood, p. 59-60

³⁵ White, 2004, p. 6

³⁶ Ibid. p. 1

³⁷ Johnstone, Lucas F. 2016. "Editorial Introduction." *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 265-268

³⁸ Johnstone, p. 266

support White's thesis identifying Western religion as the cause of our ecological problems, his style is inclusive and conciliatory so that his paper will be read and considered by his peers, such that his work can make an impact.

The third area where Plumwood and Taylor differ seems to be in their attitudes towards the Christian roots of our Western Culture. Taylor places White's paper and the Western instrumental attitude to the non-human world in a strongly Christian context, and whilst he acknowledges Roman Epicurean poet Titus Lucretius Carus (1st Century BCE) as a forerunner of this need for the non-human world to be of use to the human world³⁹, he jumps large portions of Western history before picking up the anti-Christian critique as it appears again with David Hume and other philosophers⁴⁰. In contrast Plumwood sets the Western instrumental view of nature in a clearly defined context that includes a dualistic separation of human/nature derived from the Christian religion which links Christianity into a historical cascade of thought that starts in antiquity, possibly with Plato, was transferred into the Christian religion, before being transmitted again into what became modern scientific and technological culture.⁴¹ It is interesting to note that whilst Plumwood quite clearly places Christianity within this context she does not seem to blame religion for the ecological crisis in the same way that both Lynn White, Jr and Bron Taylor do, instead she recognises that Western cultural thought is the product of a much wider context, of which religion is simply one part of a complex whole.

In reviewing these 2 papers it is possible to see several areas where they are clearly similar and clearly different; both papers provide a review of their academic fields, although they do so for different reasons; both papers are structured similarly, providing a clear and logical thought progression throughout as they review the academic context that their authors occupy; And both papers have clear biases reflecting their author's position in their respective academic fields.

In contrast, the differences between these papers reflect their authors purposes and aims in how they were written, and perhaps, subconsciously or not, they give away their attitude to the spiritual contexts in which we find ourselves. Taylor's approach is very academic with a large bibliography and a clear research purpose reflected in where the paper was published. Plumwood's approach is much more confrontational and is deliberately controversial and provocative, which is perfect for the book the chapter was written for. Finally, both authors have an interesting relationship with the culture that they and their readers are part of. Taylor seems to be more antagonistic towards what has become characterised as the Western (Christian) culture that he writes about than Plumwood. Although he sees Western Christianity as culpable in the ecological crisis, he is clearly open to the possibility that Western Religious organisations are slowly greening and wants to see if there is any evidence for it. Plumwood on the other hand seems, at worst, to be ambivalent towards the Christian thought that pervades Western culture and sees it as one of several factors contributing to the ecological crisis we now face. The truth is likely somewhere in between.

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³⁹ Taylor, 2016, p. 277

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 278

⁴¹ Plumwood, p. 45-46

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