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Module tutor: ~~Dr Jack Hunter~~ RHODRI THOMAS		
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BOOK REVIEW

Dark Green Religion; Nature Spirituality and The Planetary Future. By Bron Taylor, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 2010. Pp. 338. ISBN

This essay critically reviews *Dark Green Religion; Nature Spirituality and The Planetary Future*, by Bron Taylor.¹ In this book published in 2010, Taylor seeks to define the emergence of what he calls dark green religion. Taylor defines dark green religion as a 'religion that considers nature to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care.'² Further, he looks to give examples of where manifestations of dark green religion are allied to the environmental movement. Taylor considers the idea that a positive but deeply felt spiritual relationship with nature is intrinsic to mitigating, through activism and practice, the current ecological crisis. At the same time, Taylor explains that the qualifier 'dark' points to a possible negative side of nature spirituality and gives examples of the potentially, dangerous, violent and apocalyptic forms of dark green religion. As can be seen from the book's subtitle--'Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future', Taylor examines the role of dark green religion in determining the planet's future. In examining this hypothesis, Taylor's leaves his definitions of this religious or spiritual life as broad as possible and crucially, for a mass response to the ecological crisis, he makes a claim that this movement is a global one.³ Taylor describes manifestations of dark green religion in a thorough and rigorous scholarship combining history of the individuals he identifies as representing the dark green religious movement and provides a thorough overview of the philosophy underpinning the phenomenon. In combination with the rigorous scholarship, Taylor draws on non-academic sources and also identifies elements of dark green religion in a range of unexpected cultural, popular cultural, and sub-cultural activities including, surfing cultures, radical environmentalism, documentaries and films- such as 'The Lion King'- theme parks, direct action by environmental groups, and the Arts in general.

Throughout this book, Taylor draws upon his long and varied experience as Professor of Religion, Nature and Environmental Ethics at The University of Florida; his position as Editor-in-Chief of the Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture, a position he has held for over a decade, and his role as editor of the seminal book, the Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature.⁴ Further, Taylor has been a writer and researcher on radical environmental issues since 1990 and has edited a book about the film in 'Avatar and Nature

¹ Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (London: University of California Press Ltd, 2010).

² Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. xi.

³ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. xi.

⁴ UF Liberal Arts and Sciences, <<https://religion.ufl.edu/faculty/core/bron-taylor/>> [accessed 30 July 2021].

Spirituality’.⁵ The content of *Dark Green Religion* reflects the this varied and interdisciplinary experience as a scholar, interviewer, field scientist, activist and writer of film and documentary reviews. The author combines, academic research, personal experience, interviews conducted with relevant people, case studies, and reviews of conferences. Taylor, therefore has created a hybrid book, part-scholarly, part-general appeal. Taylor’s methodology is to structure the book as follows.

Dark Green Religion consists of eight chapters, with a preface, a Reader’s Guide, a conclusion and an appendix with excerpts from the writings of Henry David Thoreau, and an ‘Afterword on Terminology’. The use of headings and sub headings, often in italics, helps introduce, link and highlight the subject of each chapter. The book concludes with extensive notes. These exhaustive notes make up forty-eight pages of the book, and illustrate the scholarly intent of the author. There is enormous scope in this section for further academic research on the subject. However, as Taylor expresses in the Reader’s Guide, he has also designed the book to appeal to both scholars and a general readership.⁶ Whilst the opening and closing chapters are scholarly, the material in the middle of the book seek to appeal to the general reader. Following from the opening chapter, the next seven chapters are written in a variety of engaging styles: journalistic, non-specialist anthropological case studies, personal experience and reflection, interviews conducted by the author, transcripts of email conversations, conference reviews and film, literary and cultural criticism. Moreover, in terms of a general appeal, the language he uses is frequently conversational, simple, straightforward, often colloquial, for example, ‘playing hooky’ and other similar phrases.⁷ Thus, Taylor provides what he calls a ‘you were there intimacy’ that is highly readable.⁸ Similarly, his sources are often unorthodox from an academic perspective, e.g. in his concluding chapter, Taylor makes extensive use of the popular New Yorker journalist, Malcolm Gladwell’s international bestseller, ‘The Tipping Point’.⁹ Gladwell has written books designed to appeal to a popular audience, in which he takes observations from the social sciences and develops them in an accessible way. Taylor employs something of this approach particularly in the chapters on ‘Surfing Spirituality’, his examination of Disney theme parks and when he writes of the dark green religious themes of popular films. Further evidence of his unorthodox approach—particularly from an academic—is when he defends the use of Wikipedia in the Note section as a good example of the popular cultural phenomenon and a useful source.¹⁰

Despite the varied content and the interdisciplinary nature of the material, the book does flow with each chapter in general linking successfully with that which precedes it, for example, the last paragraph of chapter on Radical Environmentalism as a subculture with a dark side, leads into the subculture of surfing by highlighting its possible negative side.¹¹ However, there appears to be no obvious link between chapter six and seven. In fact, these chapter could be

⁵ Bron Taylor, *Bron Taylor* (2017)

<http://www.brontaylor.com/environmental_books/Avatar_and_Nature_Spirituality/toc-avatar.html> (accessed 30 July 2021)

⁶ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. xiii.

⁷ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p 103.

⁸ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p x.

⁹ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 207.

¹⁰ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 273.

¹¹ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 70.

stand-alone pieces. Similarly, other chapters of the book related to popular cultural phenomenon could be successful stand-alone pieces; in fact, the note section reveals that the chapter on surf culture and spirituality is the synthesis of several articles--although this does not detract from the flow of the book or Taylor's argument.¹² In general, given the author's ambitious aim to appeal to a broad readership, Taylor succeeds in connecting seemingly unrelated content lending consistency to his thesis. Taylor does so, assisted by a number of recurring themes providing a connecting thread that weaves through the book as summarised below:

1. Taylor's Schema

The opening chapter provides a useful academic model -with a useful visual model—through which to identify dark green religion in the work and activism of a broad selection of scientists, writers and philosophers together with a lengthy overview of the history of environmentalism through its main influencers.¹³ In summary, his schema identifies two types of dark green religion, Animism and Gaian Earth Religion, which he breaks down thus: Animism and Gaian cosmologies that can be interpreted as inclusive of the non-material beings and alternatively animistic or Gaian beliefs that are more naturalistic and concerned with the material rather than the supernatural. Taylor explains that these are not always distinct categories and that his schematic should be seen only an analytical tool.¹⁴ Throughout the book identifies people and movements using this classification. However, he doesn't force people into this schema, even mentioning how tedious it would be to try to classify everything in these terms, 'I do not belabor the schema'.¹⁵ This schema has been influential and has been used, for example, by Dr. Jack Hunter in his academic work.¹⁶

2. Bricolage

A second recurrent theme in the book is bricolage. Taylor describes bricolage as follows: 'bricolage, by which I mean an amalgamation of bits and pieces of a wide array of ideas and practices, drawn from diverse cultural systems, religious traditions, and political ideologies. In a bricolage these various ideas and practices are fused together.'¹⁷ Taylor applies this technique to his research when looking for manifestations of dark green religions. In the note section, he shows how he has used this approach in many articles previous to the book.¹⁸ In fact, Taylors book can be seen as a bricolage itself as he draws on a wide variety of seemingly unconnected sources. This interdisciplinary approach is the books strength and occasionally its weakness with one concern being the temptation to only select material from a wide range those manifestations that fit his thesis. On occasions, the dark green religious themes identified are so broad that their application by Taylor is questionable: a particular example, can be found in the section on Disney films: is it enough just to have 'respect and awe' for nature, 'a love for animals' as the Director of Disney does, to constitute

¹² Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 267.

¹³ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 15.

¹⁴ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 14.

¹⁵ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 41.

¹⁶ Jack Hunter, 'Belief, Experience and Behaviour,' in *Greening the Paranormal*, ed.by Jack Hunter, (August Night Press: 2019), p. 10.

¹⁷ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 14.

¹⁸ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 281.

a dark green religious approach? ¹⁹ Overall, the environmental effects of Disney and Corporations might be viewed as negative--although in the latter case, Taylor anticipates criticism and in the former, offers some critiques of his own thesis. However, other examples of dark green themes are numerous and insightful. Taylor's next theme is to consider how manifestations of dark green religious and beliefs and practices contain 'family resemblances' to existing religions.²⁰

3. Family Resemblances

Throughout the book Taylor, looks for similarities 'family resemblances' between dark green religion and established religions. For example, environmentally active people undertake pilgrimages to places where people important to the environmental movement lived described as 'Thoreauvian pilgrimages.'²¹ Using language drawn from traditional religions, Taylor describes people seminal to the movement as 'saints'. ²²Thoreau, Burroughs and Muir are shown as 'the holy trinity'.²³ Nature epiphanies—the epiphany being part of a Judeo-Christian tradition are numerous throughout the book, examples including those of activist, Julia Butterfly Hill.²⁴ Taylor discusses 'sacred texts' of which there is no single text but many. Leopold's 'A Sand County Almanac' is described as a 'holy book.'²⁵ Indeed, 'Dark Green Religion in America' could be read as Taylor proposing an alternative canon or hagiography, although he anticipates this criticism he doesn't expand on it.²⁶ There are references to indigenous or other religions throughout however but the book. For example, Taylor describes a performance of the musical 'The Lion King' as having more in common with an indigenous perspective, providing a liminal space between 'performance and ritual, between play and religion.'²⁷ Similarly, his attempts to show family resemblance in his discussion of Abram's epiphanies and Snyder's Buddhist-Animism support his thesis but are mostly the experiences of Western people.²⁸ Perhaps, Taylor is mindful of appealing to a Western audience and an American one in particular to explain dark green religions in terms they might find familiar. Similarly, Taylor is aware of a Western audience potential negative preconception of environmentalism –hence the exploration of the qualifier 'dark' in dark green religion.

4. A Dark Side

Further, the qualifier 'dark' in dark green religion is useful in two ways for the reader, not only to reflect the depth of its connectedness to nature but also to highlight the possible negative side of the phenomena. There are many and varied examples throughout: (1) accusations that Lovelock's view encourages eco-fascism. ²⁹

¹⁹ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 137.

²⁰ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 1.

²¹ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 60

²² Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 78.

²³ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 42.

²⁴ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 95

²⁵ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 34

²⁶ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 57.

²⁷ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 136.

²⁸ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 89.

²⁹ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 39.

- 2) radical environmentalist, W.C. Roger's conviction for arson.³⁰
- (3) criticism of foundational environmentalist, Muir for promoting a National Parks strategy that led to the displacement of indigenous peoples.³¹
- (4) Earth First's stated commitment to a strategy of sabotage.³²

Taylor discusses surfing as a dark green religion: 'a significant and increasing part of the evolving, global surfing world can be understood as a form of dark green religion, in which sensual experiences constitute its sacred centre.'³³ By contrast, Taylor also describes the darker side of surfing, the 'sexism, territorially and even violence'³⁴ Taylor in his introduction says it is objective to show both the positive side and the dangerous side of dark green religion and he can be seen in the above examples, he doesn't shy away from this task.³⁵ However, Taylor does so primarily to minimise the shadow side, or to show how the negative outweigh the positives, which he explains using four propositions in the book's conclusion.³⁶

Although we have seen Taylor uses mostly examples from a Western perspective, overall, Taylor argues that dark green religion is a global phenomenon and gives numerous examples throughout the book to support this thesis. They are supported by his reports from conferences he has attended in Africa, South Africa, and the global reach of Disney films and David Attenborough's documentaries. For Taylor, as signalled in the subtitle of the book, the planet's future is dependent on this religion that holds the earth as sacred. However, chapter eight entitled, Terrapolitan Earth Science, where he discusses a global policy proposed by Deudney, is more confusing than the earlier chapters of the book--the definitions of nationalism aren't clear--the discussion around nationalism, civic and religion are confusing.³⁷

Furthermore, Taylor introduces a new term 'parareligion' very late into the book in chapter adding another level of complexity.³⁸ It's interesting to note that this inconsistency occurs in the one of the chapters where both the academic and a more popular styles are combined in the same chapter. Similarly, whilst Taylor introduces a new concept late in the book with the mention of parareligion, he excludes the term 'paganism' until the Afterword of the book, explaining that it has negative connotations and that adherents of Neo-Paganism have beliefs that include the existence of spirits which are not essential to dark green religion.³⁹ However, Taylor does say that all the four-fold classification he has used throughout are identifiable in Paganism—including the belief in supernatural beings. Paganism has been mentioned throughout the book as synonymous with dark green religions, for example in the chapter on Surfing, and when he describes scientist, Jane Goodall as having been influenced by

³⁰ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 71.

³¹ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 70.

³² Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 74.

³³ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 104.

³⁴ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 105.

³⁵ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. xi.

³⁶ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p.218

³⁷ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 196.

³⁸ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p.158.

³⁹ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p.224.

paganism.⁴⁰ Further, Taylor has addressed the negative side of dark green religion so it seems unusual that a shadow side of Paganism would not be a hindrance to his thesis.

In the Preface, Taylor says that dark green religion is like a phantom and by the end of the book he suggests that it is phantom no more.⁴¹ This would be a fair assessment of the achievement of the author given Taylor's wide ranging and thorough exploration into the phenomenon – as such a highly ambitious undertaking. Also, Taylor states another objective was to 'to rattle assumptions as to what counts as religion in order to awaken new perceptions and insights' and Taylor succeeds in this objective, showing evidence for manifestations of dark green religion he finds in a diverse range of often unexpected sources⁴². His aim to highlight beneficial manifestations and the dangerous side of dark green religion is well evidenced. Further, his hope to appeal to both a scholarly and general readership works well. Given the difficulty of this highly ambitious objectives and the differing writing styles, there are some inconsistencies and some confusion --often the case studies, conference reports and discussion of cultural manifestations are the straightforward and engaging whereas some of the later, more academic chapters can be less accessible. However, overall the book is thought provoking, bringing together a synthesis of his vast scholarship and a lifetime's direct engagement with the subject and in doing so, Taylor provides the reader with a hopeful basis for an ecological worldview and consequent activism that is underpinned by a dark green spirituality.

⁴⁰ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 110; p 127.

⁴¹ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 217.

⁴² Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 4.

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