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ECO-FEMIN(*ISM*) AND HINDU(*ISM*)

Positioning Contemporary Eco-Ethic Conversation

Maheshvari Naidu♦

1. Introduction

The article examines the complex cluster of issues that accrete around attempts to refract a contemporary 'Hindu' eco-ethic from ancient scriptural sources. So often, scholars and religious adherents alike refer back to the 'golden eco-age' alluded to in the various Vedic, Upanisadic and Puranic injunctions with their invocations adoring both the earth and the life it sustains. As an academic field of study within the social sciences, however, "Religion and Ecology" is a relatively recent sub-discipline of "Religion Studies."

The claim of ecological consciousness within Hinduism is explored by revisiting the category of 'Hinduism' within the context of Religion Studies and by probing Hinduism's claim of a historically sustained relationship of eco-sensitivity. It asks how this professed worldview, romanticised as it may well be, and in any event so far removed in space and time, can be seen as translating into contemporary vocabulary.

We situate this question within the field of Religion and Ecology and the views and cautions of scholars working in the field. This, then, attempts to add to the discussion of the relationship between ecology and the Hindu religion. It proceeds by attempting to further problematize, rather than simply reconcile, by bringing into conversation also eco-feminism. Eco-feminism, which is seen as working to transcend certain value dualisms, is, thus, brought into a space of dialogue with a particular non-dual school of thought in Hinduism, which also looks at transcending the binary dualities of subject-object.

2. Ecology and Hinduism: A Possible Relationship

The academic study of Hinduism in relation to ecological issues appears to exhibit a particular typology. There are the hermeneutic and exegetical analyses of various liturgical, religio-mythological and historical texts, "in order to elucidate various philosophical arguments and precepts concerning the environment," the ethnographically based analyses, "that focus on particular cultural practices," as in the context of sacred groves,

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♦**Maheshvari Naidu** is a lecturer in Anthropology in the School of Anthropology, Gender and Historical Studies at The University of KwaZulu, Natal, South Africa.

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and socio-political analyses of movements and organisations "that actively mobilise religious values and beliefs in pursuit of various environmental goals."[1] Emma Mawdsley points out that many of these so-called analyses "complicate the popular assumption that Hinduism, like other "eastern religions," necessarily encourages behaviours that are environmentally positive."[2] This research is not positioned from an ethnographic perspective looking at certain cultural constructions of environment but is rather an attempt to add to the discussion around the complexity of constructing hermeneutic links between Hinduism and contemporary approaches to ecological issues.

While there are, indeed, nuanced writings that tease out the referential meaning of 'nature', 'environment', and 'ecology', this study does not engage in the various discourses that surround such terms and chooses to use the terms interchangeably. The focus is rather on positioning a possible dialogue, within Religion and Ecology discourse, between a particular strand of Hindu religion and eco-feminism.

Snyder informs us that, since the 1970s, the discipline of religious studies has seen an explosion of literature probing the possible interconnections between the world religions and ecological thought. He states that, in just a little over two decades, by 1991, the area was developed to the extent that the American Academy of Religion was able to grant group status to the Religion and Ecology Group. This was seen to have precipitated a series of conferences on Religion and Ecology at Harvard University, which, in turn, led to the formation of the Forum on Religion and Ecology.[3] Snyder points out that the turn in academic circles, to Eastern religious traditions as a possible means of healing perceived rift between human beings and nature is far from new. He states:

> In 1956, Alan Watts, drawing upon Eastern traditions in Nature, Man and Woman, professed the inseparability of humans from nature. Lynn White also famously suggested in "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" (1967) that Eastern religious traditions might offer antidotes to the environmentally destructive trajectories of Judaism and Christianity; while Huston Smith in "Tao Now: An Ecological

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[1]E. Mawdsley, "The Abuse of Religion and Ecology: The Vishva Hindu Parishad and Tehri Dam," *Worldviews* 9, 1 (2005), 3.

[2]Mawdsley, "The Abuse of Religion and Ecology," 5.

[3]S. Snyder, "Chinese Traditions and Ecology: Survey Article," *Worldviews* 10, 1 (2006), 100.

Testament" (1972), maintained that Chinese traditional attitudes toward nature might serve as tools for expanding the West's environmental awareness.[4]

Within the context of several Hindu traditions, two broadly constructed books that address nature and environment issues are, *Purifying the Earthly Body of God* (1998) and *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water* (2000). We are told that the latter volume is a product of the Forum on Religion and Ecology, which convened the earlier mentioned scholarly series of conferences at Harvard (1996-1998) that explored the convergences between religious and ecological topics.[5]

The task of relating religious traditions to the current concerns of environmental crises, however, is not straightforward. Scholars, like Larson, Doniger, Kinsley, and others, raise questions as to the viability of turning to Eastern traditions to help with global problems. They ask whether it is possible for a religious tradition to function properly outside its context of origination. Critics maintain that although the possibility exists, the tradition in question does not remain the same as it is in its original context. Gerald Larson expresses concern over what he sees to be the *selective use* of religious traditions as an expression no less similar to a kind of colonialism. He prefers traditions to "illuminate contemporary issues through conversation and not extraction."[6]

These are very legitimate concerns that one needs necessarily to be alert when attempting to link a particular religious tradition to modern environmental concerns. Within the structured realities of North South relations and the guises of neo-colonialism that continue to configure power relations between countries, between religious groups and between so-called ethnic communities, all allusions to colonialism need to be treated seriously. Of equal concern are those issues posed in the relatively innocently framed guises of romanticism and essentialism.

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[4]Snyder, "Chinese Traditions and Ecology," 100.

[5]G. Van Horn, "Hindu Traditions and Nature: Survey Article," *Worldviews* 10, 1 (2006), 5.

[6]G. James Larson, "Discourse about 'Religion' in Colonial and Postcolonial India" in *Ethical and Political Dilemmas of Modern India*, Ninian Smart and Shivesh Thakur, eds., New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993, 191.

3. Romanticising and Essentialising Hinduism

Writing on the origins of religious environmentalism, Emma Tomalin succinctly lays bare that this is a modern phenomenon that goes back no further than the 1960s.[7] She speaks of the 'myth of primitive ecological wisdom' that is part of a larger body of romantically framed assumptions about the existence of an 'eco-golden age' of early communities of people such as the Indian Hindu, African Khoi-San, Australian Aborigine, and others, when people were perceived to have lived in harmony with their natural environment. Unlike the religious notions of the Khoi and the Aborigine, much is known about the religious beliefs of the people of India as they moved from a history of oral traditions to written texts and as the religion is very much a lived religion that is still practised. This, in turn, has led to a vast array of lyrical descriptions and appellations, both the early religious communities in India and their perceived values and behaviours erected on allusions to the so-called historicity of the religion. This narrative of historicity is conjoined to a narrative of essentialism and is a powerful example of a kind of epistemic violence of the sameness that is constructed and that acts to sublimate religious traditions into a homogenous entity.

Not withstanding my decidedly *un*-athletic nature, I prefer to run a mile (both literally and methodologically speaking) from any one or any sentence that opens with, "Hinduism, the oldest religion in the world," or "Hinduism, one of the oldest religions in the world," or even the somewhat more conservatively constructed, "Hinduism, the oldest continuously practised religion in the world." Or, the very larger than life assertion that Hinduism "contains the truth of all religions and is accepting of all religions." These are various openings favoured by scholars taking a confessional approach and one, to continue the metaphor of movement away, distances oneself from such broad statements. It is also an opening favoured by religious adherents, that category of believers who also seek to write down their thoughts and beliefs. Here one needs to rightfully respect the internal thoughts and beliefs of the devotee, for the religious adherents' inner world is not one that social scientists should seek to deconstruct and tear apart.

However, that said, it is also an inner (believers') world that social sciences approaches, such as anthropology, or theoretical approaches, such

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[7]E. Tomalin, "Bio-Divinity and Biodiversity: Perspectives on Religion and Environmental Conservation in India," *NUMEN* 51 (2004), 267.

as feminism, would also not necessarily accept as holding representatively true or valid for all people in all religious and cultural contexts, or even within the 'same' religion for that matter.

Given the multifarious nature of multiple religious/spiritual/mystical/ inner worlds of believers, (*all* being true, in terms of differently positioned believers in different traditions) none can be accepted as including or being the same as all other religions in the sense of their ontological, soteriological, or ethical worldviews. Granted, an all-inclusive attitude may not prove such a problem to inclusively structured religions like Hinduism. It would, however, prove notoriously difficult to have the average Catholic Church-going believer finding solace and truth in the text or sacred space that the Hindu takes shelter in. While the Hindu is, so to say, a good Hindu, for following what she perceives to be an inclusive all-embracing attitude to the reality of religious pluralism, the Christian is likewise being a good Christian in her non-inclusive stance of believing that Christianity is the only path to the only true God. Of concern to us, though, is that this inner world is neither verifiable or falsifiable nor reproducible by conditions that are demanded by rigorous social scientific scrutiny. Thus, there is no way to logically sustain the essentialist claim, outside of particular lived faith-based experiences, or even externally observed mystical experiences of saints, sages, and mystics, that there is *one* essential religion, true for all socio-cultural groups, or even that there is one monolithic Hinduism or Christianity for that matter. Thus, it is not, as Sriraman and Benesch claim in monolithic terms, that "present day Hinduism can be traced back to the 1017 hymns of the *Rgveda* (c.1500 BCE),[8] and it is overly simplistic to assert, as Coward, writing a decade ago, as if there was only one 'Hinduism', that "ancient Hindu myth is founded on a profoundly ecological vision."[9] These assertions are illustrations of constructions that are passed of as being true and in time became embedded in a matrix of collective memory that haunt the corridors of academia as well the cultural spaces of congregational worship as apparitions of objectivity.

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[8]B. Sriraman and W. Benesch, "Consciousness and Science: An Advaita-Vedantic Perspective on the Science-Theology Dialogue," *Theology and Science* 3, 1 (2005), 42.

[9]H. Coward, "Hindu Spirituality and the Environment," *Eco-Theology* 3 (1997), 50.

Feminist theory, like other theories, has a lived social life.[10] Feminist theory is particularly adept at emphasising the ways cultural systems present constructions of 'reality' as if they were natural, given, or objective. This hermeneutic is of value to us in our discussion of a contemporary 'earth ethic' drawn from Hindu religious sources. For those scholars and adherents who do refer back to Hinduism as holding within its teachings, respect and awareness of the environment, often present this as a monolithic teaching within Hinduism while, at the same time, presenting an essentialist profile which mutes the many equally rich and variegated strands within Hinduism.

Several comparative religionists (Smart, Kinsley, Kumar, etc.) have pointed out that the generic term 'Hinduism' is quite often indiscriminately passed off to mean the Brahmanic Hindu religion (predominantly, although not exclusively, if one considers diasporic Hindus) of many middle class Hindus. While this is a legitimate expression of the Hindu religion, it is by no means the exclusive profile of a religion. For 'Hinduism' contains within the plural folds of its worldview/s, also the religious tenets of other categories of people who refer to themselves as Hindus, yet remaining outside the mainstream Sanskrit tradition, such as the unscheduled castes assembled under the rubric of the term Dalits, as well as the large rural populace of India that practises Mother or Amman worship, also a non-Brahmanical form of Hinduism.

Mawdsley very appropriately cautions us not to don the guise of what she refers to as "new traditionalists" attempting to recover "ancient ecological wisdom" by working to construct and erect the edifice of an idealised vision of past social and environmental harmony, in a bid to engineer a vision for an alternative future. She continues:

> As well as their historical inaccuracy and social conservatism (such arguments often ignore the evidence of human-induced ancient and pre-colonial environmental change; and neglect or even condone historical inequalities of gender, class and caste), these "new traditionalists" have difficulty in presenting realistic agendas for engaging with modern India – its industrialisation, urbanization.[11]

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[10]A. Appadurai, *Globalisation: Modernity at Large*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, 11.

[11]Mawdsley, "The Abuse of Religion and Ecology," 5.

Historically, India has been a shelter to both synchronistic developing and competing traditions. Gavin Horn states that, until the twentieth century, Hindus had a concept of India as a sacred space and they had histories and epics that established their complex common ancestry, but they did not develop a concept of themselves as a society unified by religion. He adds the imperative that the colonial reduction of religious diversity within Asian studies is one that needs to be acknowledged, pointing out that it shaped the way that Hinduism was presented and examined by those in the West.[12] In this context, van Horn states:

> Using religion as a universal designation for the multiplicity of cultural traditions found scattered among peoples throughout the globe is best done with caution and sensitivity to potential subjective biases and cultural blind spots. The term "Hinduism" is historically foreign to Indian culture(s), since it was first imposed externally, even if it has now been more widely adopted by different groups in India (not unlike – with some irony, it might be added – American "Indians" being used as an appellation for the incredibly diverse peoples who were "discovered" by Europeans in the fifteenth century).[13]

Van Horn cites Jacobsen[14] as detailing the narrative of interaction between early European missionaries and western anthropologists and scholars as they encountered and named the Other. Jacobsen states that the word "Hindu" was most probably derived from a geographical association with the Indus River, and had been used by Muslim invaders to describe the religious practices of non-Muslims as early as the eleventh century. One also adds that most scriptures, commentaries, legal treatises, when they eventually came to be formally recorded, reflect the views of their authors, who were usually elite, high caste, and educated.[15] As shown by Witt and Wiles, in their article "Nature in Asian indigenous Traditions,"[16] there

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[12]Van Horn, "Hindu Traditions and Nature," 6.

[13]Van Horn, "Hindu Traditions and Nature," 7.

[14]Van Horn, "Hindu Traditions and Nature," 7, citing K. A. Jacobsen, "India" in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, Bron Taylor, ed., London: Continuum, 2005, 823-827.

[15]Mawdsley, "The Abuse of Religion and Ecology," 4.

[16]Joseph Witt and David Wiles, "Nature in Asian Indigenous Traditions: A Survey Article," *Worldviews* 10, 1 (2006), 40-68, 42.

exist other alternate discourses on Indigenous ('Hindu' and other) traditions and Nature.

Van Horn writes in his article, where he surveys the ethnographic and theoretical literature on Hinduism and ecology, that he uses the term 'Hinduism' "only as a useful conceptual umbrella that indicates diversity more than unity, fluidity rather than stasis, and multiple practices rather than singular orthodoxies."[17] I would like to follow suit, and submit that I too use the terms 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' within this essay, as a conceptual organiser that refers to the religion's multiple and fluid personality rather than having it attempt to mute plurality and multiplicity.

Notwithstanding, the 'Hindu' tradition, however, has drawn much attention within religious environmentalist literature where commentators argue for its (Hinduism's) innate sensitivity towards the natural world.[18] In this regard, says Emma Tomalin, who has done much sustained work in the field of religion and ecology within the Hindu traditions.

> Religious environmentalists argue that religious traditions teach that the Earth is sacred and that this has traditionally served to exert control over how people interact with the natural world. However, while the recognition of "bio-divinity" is a feature of many religious traditions, including Hinduism, this is to be distinguished from religious environmentalism, which involves the conscious application of religious ideas to modern concerns about the global environment. Religious environmentalism is a post-materialist environmental philosophy that has emerged from the West and has its roots in the eighteenth century European "Romantic Movement."[19]

There are two points for consideration here: the first, as pointed out earlier, is that when we argue that Hinduism offers a privileged relationship to the environment, we need to clarify which Hinduism we are referring to. For, within the 'Hindu' religion there are multiple and at times competing worldviews that make it notoriously difficult to offer with any integrity, an overarching essentialist definition or description of what it is. This may well itself offer some answers in the seemingly large disjuncture between religious bio-divinity, where the environment is conceived as being sacred, and environmentally sensitive behaviour, which might well be absent.

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[17]Van Horn, "Hindu Traditions and Nature," 7.

[18]Tomalin, "Bio-Divinity and Biodiversity," 266.

[19]Tomalin, "Bio-Divinity and Biodiversity," 265.

The second point is that there is in itself a major difference between what is conceived of as a bio-divinity and that of religious environmentalism. Each of these concepts comes with its own historical and intellectual lineage. Tomalin adds that while bio-divinity, or divinising nature, has been a feature of many religio-cultural traditions historically, it is not synonymous with *religious environmentalism*, "which involves the conscious application of religious ideas to contemporary concerns about an environmental crisis."[20]

While scholarly critiques are attentive to the complexity of India's geographical diversity and seek to deconstruct and contest both the notion of a nativist ecological consciousness,[21] many other writers see a leitmotif of reverence for nature and environment in Hinduism. However, having environmentally sound principles in the religious tradition does not necessarily translate to environmentally sound behaviour. In an early 1967 essay by cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan entitled, "Discrepancies between Environmental Attitude and Behaviour: Examples from Europe and China," he points out that while there is an "abundance of environmentally friendly beliefs in the religious and cultural traditions of China, the actual practices of the Chinese have hardly lived up to the ideal expressed in their traditions."[22] Tomalin's[23] work with the traditional priests on the banks of the Ganges River reveals the difference between bio-divinity and environmental consciousness, and shows that even though the River is worshipped as sacred, there is a huge discrepancy between the theological understanding of ritual purity and actually maintaining physical cleanliness of the river. Alley's work cited by Mawdsley also reveals that various cognitive frameworks are seen to operate around the issue of pollution at the Ganges.[24] The proverbial bottom-line is that essentialist arguments, to me, are inherently problematic. While they appear to be inclusive, they are also subtly hegemonic. They exclude, more than they include. Thus, in our endeavour to extract an eco-ethic, we need to be clear as to which

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[20]Tomalin, "Bio-Divinity and Biodiversity," 266.

[21]E. Mawdsley, "India's Middle Classes and the Environment," *Development and Change* 35, 1 (2004), 83.

[22]Snyder, "Chinese Traditions and Ecology," 104.

[23]See E. Tomalin, "The Limits of Environmentalism in India," *Worldviews* 6 (2002), 1-30 and "Bio-Divinity and Biodiversity: Perspectives on Religion and Environmental Conservation in India," *NUMEN* 51 (2004), 265-295.

[24]Mawdsley, "The Abuse of Religion and Ecology," 1-24.

Hinduism we are referring to. This is not a mere hair splitting exercise, but serves to protect the integrity of that which we seek to refract through contemporary time and idiom and attempts to avoid further (ideologically) colonizing certain groups of people.

4. Non-dualism as a Particular Philosophical Stream in Hinduism

Given the inherent difficulties in essentialist and romantic accounts, this discussion of 'Hinduism' and the environment has narrowed the gaze specifically onto a particular non-dual perspective that can be traced to the later Upanisads in phrases such as *tat tvam asi* (That Thou Art), from the *Chandogya Upanisad*, or *aham bramamsi* (Brahman Art Thou), to be found in the *Brhdaranyaka Upanisad*.

For the most part, the Vedic literature is replete with a pantheon of gods Agni, Usas, Mitra, Varuna, Soma, and so on. Indologists, like Max Muller, Frauwallner, and Radhakrishnan, have revealed the richness of the Vedic mythology and the gods in Vedic mythology that boast both virile (Indra, Mitra,) and enchanting (Usas, Agni) personalities much like the Greek and Roman gods. It is not within the ambit of this study to examine the conflicting discourses around whether the Vedas represent the religion of the invading Indo-Germanic people who came to be known as the Aryans, or whether the Aryans were themselves an early North Indian group germane to India.

What I want to call attention to is that, while the Vedas are more liturgical, the Upanisads are more philosophical. It is also a matter of discussion as to the extent that non-dualistic ideas are developed in the Vedas themselves. Vedantic philosophies were in part intended to systematize the diverse speculations of the Upanisads and establish their legitimacy as orthodox, revealed texts.[25] These philosophical ideas, however, are not always coherently organised into philosophical systems as they are the expression of centuries of preceding oral 'texts' that came to be 'arrested' on palm leaves in time. This explains some of the inconsistent structure and inconsistently articulated philosophical ideas in the various Upanisadic texts.

However, it is in the later Upanisadic literature that we do find seminal, albeit disordered philosophical ideas that begin to find their fledgling development and are eventually adopted by the philosophical

[25]F. Clooney, "Vedanta, Theology, and Modernity: Theology's New Conversation with the World's Religions," *Theological Studies* 51, 2 (1990), 410.

giants, such as Sankara, Madhva, and Ramanuja and others. The fact that all three thinkers can legitimately refer back to the Upanisads to validate their different philosophies testifies to the fact that many seemingly contradictory ontological and epistemological utterances live amiably side by side in these texts. Thus, both Sankara's eighth century non-theistic Brahman as consciousness, or system of *Advaita*, the eleventh century theistic *Dvaita* of Madhva, as well as Ramanuja's thirteenth century theistic god philosophy or *Visistvadvaita*, can claim their ancestral roots in the Upanisads. This bears out my earlier point that it is dangerous to essentialise the multiple strands of 'Hindu' religious and philosophical thinking as it does a kind of epistemic violence to the rich diversity and multivalence within the religious and philosophical systems that go by the popular generic of 'Hinduism'.

Advaita is assumed an excellent conversation partner, thought of as being able to enter meaningfully into conversation with contemporary concerns. For the purposes of our discussion, the gaze is further narrowed onto a particular organising tenet of Advaita Vedanta, that of the popular and frequently quoted *mahavakya* or great utterance of *tat tvam asi* as understood within Sankarite philosophic thinking. It is to this *mahavakya* as expounded in the Vedanta Sutras of Brhdranyaka that we turn in our attempt to probe the plausibility of translating into contemporary language, an 'earth ethic' based on ancient scriptural sources. It is important that we take a particular exegetical unpacking of Sankara for our focus. While both *Visistvdvaita* and *Dvaita* have offered their own hermeneutic of this *mahavakya*, it is specifically the exegesis offered by Sankara that I feel best serves a contemporary feminist idiom.

While Ramanuja describes a loving theistic Brahman within which the individual Atman is both the same *and* different, Madhva describes the statement also in theistic referents but dualistically, to be actually *atat tvam asi*, Brahman and Atman are different. However, Sankara unpacks a philosophy of not two, where Atman and Brahman are grasped as One, as the monistic principle of Brahman. This Brahman is to be arrived at by the double negation as mentioned in the *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*, contained in the statements, "Brahman is not this…, Brahman is not that," or 'not this' 'not this', *neti*, *neti*, where having negated everything that exists (in both material and non-material terms) one 'arrives', having never been anywhere else, at the Brahman.

The hermeneutics of his reasoning, as that of his many skilled commentators is highly nuanced, subtle and fine grained whereas we are, for our purposes, looking at an almost bare-bones description of Advaita philosophy. The technicalities of Vedanta interpretation lie outside the scope of this study and for the present purposes, we may be forgiven for capturing merely the starkness of the utterance as being that of the monistic principle of 'Brahman and Atman are One'. The Advaita Vedanta of Sankara attempts to resolve the Upanisadic dilemma of the nature of Brahman and provides perhaps a solution to the western dilemma of dualism.[26] Sriraman and Benesch are of the opinion that one of the most influential and far reaching paradigmatic shifts in the natural sciences (of the west) in contemporary times has been away from the view of a complete duality or "separation between observer and observed, to an awareness that an observer also represents a living aspect of that which is being observed.''[27]

It is also the singular Advaita hermeneutic of ultimate non-duality that we seek to refract through eco-feminism. According to Advaitic doctrine, the true nature of Brahman is to be arrived at by the sublimation of dualities. This particular exegetical unpacking of scripture follows from the Advaitic doctrine of two levels of 'reality': *vyavaharika* or the phenomenal, relative reality, where duality is experienced and the *paramarthika*, or transcendental non-dual reality. Etymologically, *a-dvaita* means the negation of all duality.[28]

> Etymologically, "*advaita*" does not so much present a clear assertion about the nature of being as it attempts to rule out from the beginning a false understanding of reality. *Advaita* is basically a denial; it is literally the negation of a duality (*a-dvaita*) of some unspecified type.[29]

5. Conversation between Eco-Feminism and Advaita Vedanta

The reflexively positioned Second Wave feminism can be seen as having rebelled against essentialised and 'othered' categories such as women, and essentialised and othered groups of religions and religious communities of people. As a body of theory, it sought to include the lived experiences of

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[26]Sriraman and Benesch, "Consciousness and Science," 43.

[27]Sriraman and Benesch, "Consciousness and Science," 35.

[28]M. P. P. Penumaka, "Luther and Shankara: Two Ways of Salvation in the Indian Context," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 45, 3 (2006), 257.

[29]Penumaka, "Luther and Shankara," 260.

black, and the so-called 'third world' women as well as the subalterns as previously marginalised others. 'Feminism Studies' within religion was likewise conscientised to be alert to powerful religious discourses that may well have muted alternate narratives, which more faithfully represented the lived experiences of various subalterns such as the indigenous religious traditions of countries like India.

I am in agreement with Emma Mawdsley, according to whom, given all of this, it does not mean that the potentially positive relationship between Hinduism and ecology is de-legitimised, but that extracting idioms and understandings of Hinduism(s) must be understood as a complicated enterprise.[30] There has been substantial work done in the context of globalisation, feminism and genres of resistance on the part of women, such as within the context of resistance and activism surrounding the Chipko movement. Critical scholars, like Vandana Shiva, have done important work that sought to contextualize the many ecological crises in India within the frame of a western capitalistic society that is eroding into the traditional lifestyles of the subaltern rural peoples in India. However, Vandana Shiva herself has come under fire from other feminist critics who point out that she (Shiva) offers a discourse of Hindu women that essentialises them as a category within a dominant Sanskritised Hindu discourse. Vandana Shiva is in addition rightly criticized for what is perceived as her essentialist stance inscribing her perspective, that women are biologically closer to nature than men, so they necessarily care more about nature.

There are also numerous studies from various perspectives of sacred Hindu topography, goddess worship, nature divinities and, in more recent times, Gandhian ethics and so on. The list is impressively long in terms of the kinds of studies, textual and ethnographic as well as socio-political that cover issues in Hinduism and ecology. However, many of the later, more critically positioned works have revealed the fallacies inherent in several earlier articles that have confused bio-divinity for environmental consciousness in attempting to ambitiously forge links between the Hindu religion and ecology.

There are, thus, many points of apparent contact between the Hindu religion and ecology, some more plausible than others. All, however, need to be understood as complicated exercises that offer suggestive

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[30]Mawdsley, "The Abuse of Religion and Ecology," 5.

frameworks for rapprochement rather than neat Hindu Ethic blueprints for contemporary times. For me, a plausible point of rapprochement is that of ecological feminism and the Advaita Vedanta strand of Hinduism in our attempt to offer one such suggestive framework and attempt to refract a contemporary eco-ethic. An Advaitic approach, which strives to exclude any kinds of alterity or 'other', can be brought into dialogue with an eco-feminist perspective in their bid to transcend the dualities of subject/object or 'us' (people) versus 'it' (nature). I use the word refract rather than extract because I am all too aware of the cautionary sounding of comparative religion scholars, like Larson,[31] who appeal for a rapprochement of sorts, that will allow for a discussion between two traditions rather than an extraction.

The premise presented in this essay is necessarily exploratory and, like many other studies, there cannot be absolute and direct links between eco-feminism and Hinduism. Making such a claim would be as fallacious as many myopic earlier studies. However, eco-feminism is thought to bring some important conversation points to the table. First, feminist theory is felt to be particularly apposite here as there is some resonance, epistemologically and ethically, as eco-feminists point out, with the gendered oppressed world of the female as there is of the subjugated and dominated earth. Additionally, feminism (quite evidently) is not a religious tradition. We would, thus, not be culpable of attempting to extract or reductively subsume one religion into another. Second, and most importantly for our discussion, both Advaita Vedanta and ecological feminism speak about dualisms and of dualisms that need to be transcended. In Sankara's Advaita Vedanta the ultimate duality is that of the Atman-Brahman that has to be transcended through an experiential realization of *tat tvam asi.* In ecological feminism, it is the value dualisms operating in the world (equivalent of Sankara's relatively real world) that have to be transcended.

Both eco-feminism and Advaita seek a self-realization, although radically differently conceived. Advaitins seek to transcend the illusory world and realize the Self or Brahman. Eco-feminists seek to transcend what is also perceived as an illusory distinction between high and low

[31]Larson, "Discourse about 'Religion' in Colonial and Postcolonial India," 181-193.

values. For one vital strand of ecological feminism is the focus on the analyses of related value dualisms in patriarchal western culture.[32]

In terms of ecological feminism, value dualisms are conceptualized as pairs of disjuncts in which each side is taken to be radically different from the other, and one is ranked as morally better based on alleged differences.[33] Likewise, within Advaita Vedanta are the dualisms of Atman and Brahman that are in a sense radically and hierarchically different on one level, at the phenomenal and relative realm, but emerge as no different once the individual attains liberation. At this point, all dualisms and embedded hierarchies are not only non-existent – they are understood as never having existed. All that is left is the Brahman. One can construct a tenuous but plausible hermeneutic link between these (relatively speaking non-existent) dualisms or ultimate disjuncts of Atman-Brahman and the so called value-laden dualisms in eco-feminism, where the dualisms and in-built hierarchies are alleged and perceived from one end as being radically discrete from each other. Within eco-feminism the aim is to transcend the value dualism that foist and foster separation and moral superiority and so retard eco-humane values and behaviours towards the surrounding environment of humans and nature. Eco-feminism claims to work through this transcendence toward a re-conceptualised Self that is not dualistic.

The failure of mainstream environmental philosophies is felt as deriving from a particular dualistic conception of self. This conception, we are told, sees the self against others and does not leave room for essential connection to others. "It instrumentalises others and treats nature as an object of the self."[34] Whilst the objective in Advaita is to transcend this world of illusion and be liberated, 'out' of this world in a sense, the objective in eco-feminism is to transcend illusory value hierarchies and attain a connected self and be more 'in' the world. Writers within eco-feministic frames of thinking, thus, propose the conception of a mutual self. A care ethic is claimed as being logically related to the conception of a mutual self and the mutual self is claimed as standing in a particular relationship of care, respect and custodianship to nature and

[32]Maruyama Masatsugu, "Deconstructive Ecofeminism: A Japanese Critical Interpretation," *Worldviews: Environment Culture Religion* 4, 1 (2000), 184.

[33]Masatsugu, "Deconstructive Ecofeminism," 184.

[34]Masatsugu, "Deconstructive Ecofeminism," 184.

environment.[35] Those who advocate the mutual self from an eco-feminist standpoint also insist on an ethic of care as being part of a connected concept of the self. Feminist revisions of knowledge can be seen as having also a social imperative, where knowledge is not sought for its own sake but is positioned toward interconnected action and outcomes.

According to the Earth Charter, what is required is exactly this sort of attention to maintaining ecological integrity, promoting democracy, socio-economic justice, peace and non-violence, all of which are concurrently also the aim of eco-feminists. Thus, these are worthy goals from an ecological feminist standpoint. In addition, the Charter underpins the link between preserving ecological integrity and promoting moral treatment of human beings and that of nature as being interconnected enterprises.[36] In terms of particular strands of Hinduism, Coward states that the activist Guha's activism critique is based on the 'Hindu' perspective that people are not separate from, but constitute an interconnected part of the nature. Therefore, ecological goals are best served not by separating people from nature but by ensuring that people live intimately with nature in ways that support the diversity and harmony of the whole, conceived of in this instance in terms of Guha's thesis as being, God's body. Francis Clooney argues:

> (T)he Hindu Vedanta theology, as represented here by the nondualist (advaita) school of Sankara (8th century C.E.), is an ally that supports a theological critique of some major features of modern thought and shows a way to re-establish referentiality.[37]

He adds that Vedanta challenges theology to review and rethink its own intersection with modernity.[38] The point of re-establishing referentiality is intriguing. It implies re-establishing our referentiality with Brahman. This exegetical process is one that is poised as being able to converse with the eco-feminists in their quest to establish a mutual self. Of course, the danger inherent in such a mutual placing of Advaita self and eco-feminism self is to imply that one is talking about the same 'self', when quite obviously they are. It is more the notion of duality and non-duality in

[35]Masatsugu, "Deconstructive Ecofeminism," 185.

[36]Sarah Mcfarland Taylor, "Reinhabiting Religion: Green Sisters, Ecological Renewal, and the Biogeography of Religious Landscape," *Worldviews* 6, 3 (2002), 227.

[37]Clooney, "Vedanta, Theology, and Modernity," 402.

[38]Clooney, "Vedanta, Theology, and Modernity," 402.

Advaita and eco-feminism that we seek to place mutually in a space of dialogue.

Many western philosophers and social and environmental commentators continue to see the system of non-duality in Hindu religions and philosophies as an important resource in ecology. They see it as a natural expression of reverence for all things.[39] There appears to be, however, seemingly justifiable criticism against attempts to link the negative theology[40] of Advaita with (positive) 'environmental' thinking. The claim is that Advaita Vedanta is world negating, advocating a negation or, put differently, transcendence of all categories in this perceived relative realm. Critics point out that such world negation is far from inducing environmental compassion where social and environmental welfare is overthrown for soteriological fulfilment. This is a fairly substantial charge given the fact that the value dualisms within eco-feminism discourse quite obviously refer to the environmental ethics within what the Sankarite thinking would conceive of as the phenomenal realm.

While the 'oneness doctrine' and its ecological implications have been noted by environmentalists looking at religious material and religious resources, Narayanan is of the opinion that the recent work of Lance Nelson shows how the Advaita conceptual system does not promote eco-friendly behaviour and asserts that the non-dual doctrine as presented by the philosopher Sankara presents, in actual fact, a functional dualism. For Nelson, Sankara does not see any spiritual value inherent in nature. Nelson demonstrates that this philosophy, in fact, devalues nature and concludes that this is not the kind of non-dualism that those searching for an eco-ethic and for ecologically supportive modes of thought might wish to pursue,[41] and questions the celebrated holism of Hinduism, which supposedly stands in opposition to the transcendental dualism of the Semitic religions. Mawdsley tells us that these problems urge prudence in conceptualising a relationship between Hinduism and "pro-environmental values, attitudes or behaviours."[42] The claim of critics like Nelson is that

[39]Penumaka, "Luther and Shankara," 255.

[40]Penumaka, "Luther and Shankara," 257.

[41]V. Narayanan, "One Tree Is Equal to Ten Sons: Hindu Responses to the Problems of Ecology, Population, and Consumption," *Journal of Academy of Religion* 65, 2 (2002), 295.

[42]Mawdsley, "The Abuse of Religion and Ecology," 6.

the philosophies of Sankara and Ramanuja are relevant to those who seek liberation but are not to be seen as being guides to everyday behaviour. They further claim that Hindu communities and customs are established, not on the sense of oneness or equality found in *moksa* but on many other socially embedded hierarchies and stratifications based on gender, caste, age, economic class, etc.

The texts that deal with *moksa* or liberation are primarily concerned with ontological issues such as the nature of Reality, or Brahman and Atman, and soteriological concerns of realizing that Brahman. As the dharma texts traditionally deal with ethics, the charge is that the *moksa* texts do not focus much on ethics or righteous behaviour in this world. Theological and certain philosophical texts focus on weaning one away from the secular pursuit of happiness to what is considered to be the ultimate goal of liberation from this life. Narayanan informs us:

> It is important to keep this taxonomy in mind, because theological doctrines do not necessarily trickle down into dharmic or ethical injunctions; in many Hindu traditions, in fact, there is a disjunction between dharma and *moksa*.[43]

The claim is that there is a fundamental opposition between *moksa*, which in effect is release, from the realm governed by dharma or ethics. The assertion is that dharma texts promote righteous behaviour on earth, and *mok□a* texts encourage one to be detached from such concerns.[44] However, such a reading of Advaita is perhaps glossing over other alternative readings that point out that, before one can realize the non-duality of Brahman, one must first have met all the ethical requirements of the Hindu scriptures, including the ecological requirements specified by the Karma Theory. Harold Coward states that it may well appear so:

> Sankara's prescription for release from this state of ignorance that causes our continued re-birth is to existentially realize the radical separation of our true self (Atman) from nature or *maya*… The danger in all of this from an ecological perspective is that it could lead one to assume that what happens in the world of nature does not matter. Since *m□ya* or the world ultimately does not exist, it is not worth worrying about in ethical terms.[45]

[43]Narayanan, "One Tree Is Equal to Ten Sons," 296.
[44]Narayanan, "One Tree Is Equal to Ten Sons," 297.
[45]Coward, "Hindu Spirituality and the Environment," 55.

The Advaitic treatment of Self is hierarchical in nature, seeking to liberate itself beyond the incarnate 'everyday-life' Self. The historical Self, with a constructed autobiography – is 'erased' when the Atman realizes its oneness with Brahman. There is, however, as Coward shows, at this point, yet another level of spiritual realization that lies beyond the ethical, articulated as direct union with Brahman. It is at this final level that the world with it concomitant ethical environmental concerns are left behind, when they cease to exist.[46] Some commentators may well point out that one does not necessarily have to be a so-called 'good human being' or perform ethical deeds in order to qualify for salvific release within the soteriological framework of Advaita Vedanta. This is unlike theistic theological and philosophical systems that prescribe dharmic or ethical acts as preparatory for 'working' toward and attaining liberation.

However, it is perhaps simplistic to hold that spiritual realization lies completely outside any ethical consideration in Advaita Vedanta. Although Advaita does speak of a radical ontological distinction between absolute consciousness (Brahman) and modified consciousness (Atman), for Sankara this relative phenomenal world is very real from the side of the aspirant seeking *moksa* or liberation.

Almost all epistemologies are based on a paradigmatic partition between the subject and the object. Arvind Sharma articulates that this division is fundamental to all conventional epistemologies, inasmuch as it is in concert with common sense. According to such an epistemology, the subject or the individual as a psychosomatic identity is to be clearly differentiated from what he or she perceives namely, the object.[47] Sharma also draws attention to the point that even though Advaita Vedanta is generally considered an idealistic school of philosophy from an ontological perspective, its epistemology is realistic. "Advaita Vedanta claims some kind of reality even for objects of illusion." "To be perceived is *to be*."[48] Thus, it is only when *moksa* has been attained there comes the realization that none of that is or was ever (ultimately) real. It is only at this juncture, as Harold Coward points out, the world, with its cluster of ethical environmental concerns is 'left behind' and it ceases to exist.[49]

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[46]Coward, "Hindu Spirituality and the Environment," 59.

[47]A. Sharma, "Who Speaks for Hinduism?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, 4 (2000), 757.

[48]Sharma, "Who Speaks for Hinduism?" 756.

[49]Coward, "Hindu Spirituality and the Environment," 59.

It is through the classic exegete of the double negation of *neti*, *neti* (not this, not this) that one is said to arrive at the realization of what is Real. The purpose, simplistically put, is to realize that ultimately all, except Brahman, is illusory. The double negation can possibly be refracted out of the soteriological context for the purpose of appropriation into the eco-feminist's aim to negate value dualisms that carry embedded hierarchies that polarize people and nature, and groups of people (for example, male against other groups of people, or females). One suggests that what the "'not this', 'not this'" methodological tool can do, is offer a way to question all that appears to be objectively or logically, or empirically, *valid*, by attempting to rationally sustain a kind of disbelief in the face of what is or rather what appears to be.

This is perhaps not as esoteric as it sounds. The methodological tool of negation can perhaps, be taken out of its soteric context and experimented with in a social context. Feminism and feminist thinking often work within the theoretical perspectives of social constructionism that reveal that the so-called realities, race and ethnic groups, sex and gender roles, values-determining attitudes, and behaviours towards the environment, etc., are cultural and, in certain instances, colonially and imperially constructed and made to appear as objective givens in society. Indeed, the very environment itself emerges as a cultural construct as shown in many ethnographic studies, such as those of Tomalin, Mawdsley and others. At the heart of Advaitic negation is the awareness that, on some level, all that we accept as being true may only be constructs that can be deconstructed and *dis*-assembled in as much as they were *con*structed.

There is some resonance here with the work of contemporary figures such as the American spiritual teacher Byron Katie, although she does not refer to herself by those labels. Her methodology is startlingly simple and contained in the petite but powerful question, "Is it true?" We are meant to subject everything, but perhaps more-so to that which cause us stress and difficulty (thoughts, beliefs, values, opinions, the so-called facts) and that which we hold as true up to the naked interrogation of "Is it true?", "Can you absolutely know that it is true?" and, finally, "Who would you be without that thought?" In other words, who would we be if we *did not* hold that to be *true*? It is outside the scope of this study to explore the profound ramifications for the attainment of peace of mind of this simple methodology at attempting to arrive at what is truly true. However, what we draw attention to is that, both feminism, of which eco-feminism is a vital branch, and Advaita are well aware of *constructs* that masquerade as

the 'real thing'. Again, the nature of the constructs and how they are constructed varies, ontologically and epistemologically, in Advaita and eco-feminism. The intention is not to conflate the notion of constructs, but to, as has been the endeavour throughout the essay, to create a space for dialogue. In so doing, the aim is to see how ancient scriptures can be refracted into contemporary idioms that are possibly spiritual but also practically applicable outside of a spiritual or religious contextual situatedness. The individual conversation partners of Advaita and eco-feminism are well-known in the west. Advaita has, especially of all the religio-philosophical systems from the Indian subcontinent, taken the strongest hold on the 'western' mind.

Writing on whether the Advaita is to be grasped as a theology or philosophy, Penumaka rightly states as follows:

> Advaita *Vedanta* – whether regarded in modern times as a philosophical system, a theology, or more precisely, a theology that is essentially exegetical – remains today, as it has since the nineteenth century, the school of Hindu thought that has been the best known to Western students of Indian religious history.[50]

Sankara himself describes the Brahman in *non*-theistic as opposed to *a*-theistic terms. There are also categories of feminist thinkers that claim belief in a God as well as those that claim to be humanistic and understand their social consciousness as deriving from principles of humanism. The hermeneutics of transcending the Atman-Brahman can be embraced within either theological or philosophical referents. Eco-feminists can consider themselves in engaging in either a purely ethical or philosophical exercise. For those feminists who profess to explore the process of transcending value dualisms for personal spiritual growth, Advaita does offer a space to dialogue and a particular means to exclude alterity within a contemporary context.

6. Conclusion

It should be clear that while there appears to be, indeed, a wealth of eco-caring and eco-friendly knowledge and a sense of bio-divinity and ecological wisdom in the multiple traditions that go by the generic of Hinduism, and conceptual and exegetical insights and tools in the religio-philosophical traditions such as Advaita, it is nevertheless a complicated exercise to refract ideas and understandings out

[50]Penumaka, "Luther and Shankara," 259.

of their matrix of historical and cultural, and political embeddedness. As the discussion has attempted to show, bio-divinity, a feature of many early, notably South Asian and South East-Asian religious traditions, and is not to be subsumed under the rubric of 'religious environmentalism', which is a far more recent development, both bio-divinity and religious environmentalism trace back to discrete intellectual lineages of thought and are/were informed by particular historical trajectories. The sustained refrain of this study is that not much is to be gained by a contemporary audience confronted with the realities of global environmental catastrophes by a *mere pointing out* that bio-divinity is a feature of religions like Hinduism. For, there exists, in particular instances like the environmental plight of the (revered) river Ganges, a quantum chasm between what is claimed as being in the canonical texts, about the earth and her precious waters, and how one actually behaves towards these resources.

Thus, given the complexities and polysemic voices and traditions within Hinduism, all equally legitimate to their own categories of adherents, we want to isolate dynamic strands of thinking both from Hinduism and Eco-feminism so that a dialogue can be initiated and positioned that can find contemporary meaning for the ears of activists, spiritual or otherwise, as well as the lay communit(ies). What has been offered here is a suggested framework for bringing together in dialogue, the non-dualistic Advaita and eco-feminism, both seen as working toward transcending dualisms and attaining to what they (each in their individual conceptual frameworks) refer to as a 'mutual self'. It is dialogue, rather than an essentialist conflation or superficial extraction from Hindu ritual or philosophical sources that holds the hope of transformative change.