The Religious Dimensions of Sustainability: Institutional Religions, Civil Society, and International Politics since the Turn of the Twentieth Century

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Abstract
Beginning with the first wave of environmentalism in North America and Europe around the turn of the 20th century, this article briefly characterizes the emergence and globalization of the idea of sustainable resource management, and later sustainable development and sustainability, focusing specifically on the religious dimensions of these social movements. Religious ideation, language, imagery, and metaphor have been important in the ways that sustainability has been framed in the public sphere, particularly in the past one hundred years. Interestingly, it is through the medium of these spiritualized public discourses that disparate, affectively oriented sustainability narratives contact each other and sometimes cross-pollinate. Manifestations of sustainability and sustainable development discourse from the global North intersect the religious dimensions of sustainability discourse deployed by indigenous and other marginalized cultures, which have advanced their own understandings of such terms and their own constitutive values. In such cases, sustainability discourse is both decidedly religious and highly political.

Introduction

The term sustainability is often related to the core values of the person or group utilizing it, and when deployed in the public sphere, it may act as a political religion by facilitating particular exchange relations, binding communities together, and focusing collective desire.1 If, as religion scholar Stephen Prothero (2007) has argued, religion is now ‘one of the key identity markers of the twentieth century’ (p. 7), then the concept of sustainability can also be imagined as an important identity marker, since it is often used by individuals and groups as a shorthand reference to a set of future-oriented practices and values enacted in a social context, a pathway out of a complexly related set of social, political, economic and ecological problems. In the public sphere deployments of both of these identity markers often draw on or express affinity with the other. Arguments for sustainable behaviors often utilize normative language and spiritual values while religious groups or individuals often argue that adopting more sustainable lifestyles is a religious duty. In public discourse the pairing of two affectively oriented identities is nearly always strategic. With regard to religion at least, the anthropologist Jonathan Benthall (2008) concurred when he argued that ‘the definition of religion is political. It is a legitimating claim, a discursive strategy’ (p. 8). Definitions of sustainability, I would argue, are likewise strategically deployed. For this reason, I think it is less important to define sustainability than it is to note what specific people or groups mean when they use the term, and to see how these particular usages expose their core values and deep beliefs.2 While uses of the term sustainability multiply, there has been a dearth of attention to the ways in which the
religious dimensions of sustainability, those that refer to these core values and deep beliefs, may either reinforce or challenge the dominant sociopolitical structures. My arguments here are, first, that these religious dimensions have been important in the ways that sustainability has been framed in the public sphere, particularly in the past one hundred years. Second, descriptions of what diverse constituencies value most deeply and wish to sustain indefinitely are often couched in religious language, metaphor, or imagery, making this religious dimension one of the discourses through which disparate, affectively oriented sustainability narratives contact each other and sometimes cross-pollinate. It is through these often-religious large-scale stories that manifestations of sustainability and sustainable development discourse from the global North intersect the religious dimensions of sustainability discourse from indigenous and other marginalized cultures, which have advanced their own understandings of such terms and their own constitutive values. In such cases, sustainability discourse is both decidedly religious and highly political.

Although my focus is primarily on the interaction of sustainability advocates in North America and Western Europe and how they engage with indigenous and marginalized cultures, researchers with greater expertise in other parts of the globe could confirm the presence of these religious dimensions in debates over the meaning of sustainability and sustainable development on other continents (see for example Lansing 1991; Wright 2009).

*Sustainability Through 1986*

The beginnings of what the geographer Aidan Davison (2001) called the ‘first wave’ of environmentalism emerged at the turn of the 20th century: from resource scarcity and environmental concern in Europe, the emergence of Romanticism, the myth of the frontier, the elaboration (in art, music, and national parks) of a new U.S. nationalism in the form of wilderness, the formation of the Sierra Club by John Muir (1892), the creation of the Audubon Society (1905), and finally the emergence of a scarcity ethic in the United States. By the early 1920s the discourse of *development* had become a frequent compliment to the idea of sustained resource use over time (which had been popularized in the United States by Gifford Pinchot [1910]; the country’s first forester and resource manager), eventually leading to the now popular term *sustainable development*. The development expert Gilbert Rist argued that by deploying the idea of *development*, ‘by defining itself as the precursor of a history common to all, the West could treat colonization as a generous undertaking to “help” more or less “backward” societies along the road to civilization’ (Rist 1997, p. 43). With the full inertia of the First World War’s aftermath behind it, development flourished on the newly international world stage as a new ‘global faith’.

After World War II, the formation of the Bretton Woods institutions and U.S. President John F. Kennedy’s later declaration that the 1960s was to be the ‘decade of development’ ensured that development remained an important political ideal. The Bretton Woods Institutions include the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and the World Bank. Plans for these organizations were first developed at a meeting in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire (USA) in 1944. These groups have typically been the primary drivers of what some have called neoliberalism (see for example Harvey 2005). Licking their wounds from battles with countries ruled by fascists and emperors, the younger generations in Northern Europe and the United States were uneasy about the promise of technological progress and sources of authority (whether political or economic). This unease, typically associated
with the countercultural discontent that bubbled up in the 1950s and 1960s, included members of ‘peace, civil rights, feminist, New Left, and neo-Marxist movements’ (Davison 2001, p. xii). Armin Geertz argued that these movements were symptoms of a ‘new primitivism’ which grew in part from ‘the hippie movement’, and that they cross-pollinated with closely related tributary movements that grew out of the University of Chicago’s History of Religions research program spearheaded by Mircea Eliade. Geertz argued that Eliade’s (1964) book *Shamanism* and his larger research program influenced the theosophy movement, the author Jack Kerouac and one of Kerouac’s real-life protagonists Gary Snyder, and helped to prompt the turn to the East and to indigenous traditions as sources of spiritual growth (Geertz 2004, p. 55).

These countercultural currents in Europe and the United States provided sustainability movements with ties to peace and labor movements, and advertised the idea that development and globalization were not always universally good. Meanwhile, what Rist called the ‘global faith’ of development was increasingly touted by governments and multinational groups such as the UN as the means to alleviate poverty and increase security in a sustainable manner (Rist 1997).

The UN first addressed environmental issues directly in 1968 when the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) created resolution 1346 (XLV), which recommended that the General Assembly consider convening a UN conference dedicated to addressing a ‘crisis of world wide proportions…the crisis of the human environment’ (Jolly et al. 2004, p. 125). This tone of crisis set the stage for the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm (1972), which, in response to the ECOSOC resolution, for the first time brought concerns about sustainability to the global community by suggesting that un-sustainability was directly correlated with poverty in the developing world. Thus, the roots of sustainability and sustainable development reach into both subcultures of resistance as well as institutional and international political and economic structures.

The World Commission on Environment and Development

The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) was convened in 1986 to renew focus on themes discussed at the Stockholm Convention (1972), the Brandt Commission (focused on North-South relations 1979), and the Palme Commission (focused on national and international security issues 1979–1982). The WCED provided the most widely used definition of sustainable development. Invoking the metaphor of the ‘wheel of life’ (typically attributed to indigenous cultures), the Commission’s publication *Our Common Future* noted that common resources were marked by an interdependence not contained by the political boundaries drawn by humans and their cultures (WCED 1987, p. 262).

Both the Stockholm and WCED reports preserved the idea that raising standards of living in the developing world could only be achieved by stretching carrying capacity so that economic growth could continue unabated. This led some critics of the WCED to dismiss it as inconsistent, since it defended both economic growth and living within the carrying capacity of the planet.

In 1988, however, the year after *Our Common Future* was published, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) released a work intended for a more popular audience. The title, *Man Belongs to the Earth* (UNESCO 1988), was drawn from a now famous speech by Suquamish Chief Seattle, and the work aimed to a spirituality of interconnection and an accompanying ethic that was at this time
becoming an increasingly frequent accompaniment to sustainability discourse. The roughly animistic global civil religion portrayed in the UNESCO publication is one example of the influence oppositional subcultures have had on international political discourse.

**Beyond Brundtland: The Road to Rio**

The WCED Report had concluded by suggesting that the UN sponsor an international Conference to ensure progress toward the WCED’s goals (WCED 1987, p. 343; see also Rist 1997, p. 188). The 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was the response to this call.

In preparation for the upcoming UNCED, or Earth Summit, a ‘World Conference of Indigenous Peoples on Territory, Environment and Development’ was held the week prior to the UNCED at Kari Oca, a site on the outskirts of Rio (perhaps symbolically highlighting the marginalization of indigenous voices in the development dialog). Invoking the metaphor of ‘Mother Earth’ or ‘Pacha Mama’, the indigenous peoples drew attention to their own blending of knowledge and spirituality. One indigenous activist noted that they had ‘come to share with the world and the UNs our way of thinking, our visions, our way of life, an alternative. We do not speak of the “environment”; we speak of the spiritual and physical world in which we live’ (quoted from Grefa, in Hart 2005, p. 1,763). A member of the Haudenosaunee Nation echoed his sentiments, ‘We need to seek a balance between the spiritual and the political...Americans have two houses, one for government and one for prayer. Our people keep them together’ (Hart 2005, p. 1,763). This ‘People’s Summit’ drew some 20,000 additional people to Rio. This group, philosophically, intellectually and geographically separated from the UN-sponsored Earth Summit, highlighted a different set of issues including food production and alternative economic and environmental policies (Rist 1997, p. 188, 191).

The next week, in a directly religious overture at the Earth Summit, conference chairman Maurice Strong and several other delegates endorsed what they called the ‘Earth Charter’. Promoted on the international stage largely by religion scholars, the Charter invokes a global ethic grounded in a moral anthropology of kinship with other humans and non-human entities that is in many ways religious (Rockefeller 2005; Taylor 2010, pp. 184–7; Tucker 2006). Beyond Rio, the ceremony and pageantry at the 2002 Earth Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa depicted a spiritualized evolutionary cosmogony, the common ancestry of humanity, and suggested that humanity’s past, and also its future, must be bounded by the limits of a finite world (Taylor 2004, 2010).

The idea of sustainability, and its major benchmarks, have been attended and promoted by both institutional and elite sectors of society as well as resistance-oriented members of civil society. Religious narratives of interdependence undergird both global subcultures of resistance, and the North American and European mainstream sustainability discourse. Some have argued that a new, global **sustainability ethic** is implied by the meta-narrative of sustainability. For example, as noted anthropologist Darrell Posey put it, ‘on the level of international policy-making, the emergence of a new paradigm encapsulated by a global ethic centers on the terms sustainability and sustainable development’ (Posey 1999, p. 446). The question remains, however, whether this global ethic is endorsed by individuals in marginalized cultures or whether international sustainability discourse has simply adopted and adapted their tropes and language to further North American and European development interests.
Contemporary Contributions to the Religious Dimension of Sustainability from Institutionalized Religions, Political Institutions, and Subcultures of Resistance

The Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), led by Martin Palmer, is one organization that seeks to combat global ethical formulations. Palmer recalled the gradual involvement of religious scholars in conservation and development work beginning in the late 1980s. Hans Kung’s work advancing a ‘global ethic’ helped to inspire an exhibition on religions and ethics in Washington, DC in 1989 (Palmer and Finlay 2003). For Palmer, Kung’s grand global ethic is ‘academically interesting, but ultimately irrelevant to the world I work in…that’s not what I’m dealing with when I’m in Indonesia working with single mothers running a logging operation according to the Qur’an’ (Interview May 29, 2008). Palmer and the ARC do, however, work with both institutionalized, global religions, political institutions (the UN, the World Bank, and national governments), as well as with such local populations who are often resistant to understandings of sustainability or sustainable development offered by these hegemonic religious and political authorities. Among each of these constituencies, however, religion or spirituality is envisioned as a crucial component of sustainability. For Palmer, religion provides the traction required to broker with these disparate constituencies, though much of ARCs work occurs behind the scenes. Palmer noted,

Some people say ‘Well, we’ve never heard of you [ARC]’. And if you read Prince Philip’s interview on our website, he makes the point: You never should! It should look as though the most natural thing in the world is that the major religions would work with the major bodies concerned with saving the planet and preserving habitats. We’re the invisible glue that mends the plate. (Interview May 27, 2008)

One of the project directors at the ARC is a ‘devout’ atheist and socialist who nonetheless agrees that developing a sustainable and just culture is impossible without religious people and communities. Despite his atheism he believes that his work cultivates the sort of mindfulness that is an exercise in spiritual formation.20 The goal of Palmer and others engaged in this work is, in a sense, to illustrate that when sustainability-oriented stories draw on metaphors of apocalypse or green utopias, valorize earlier or alternative cultural mores and practices (such as the wisdom of indigenous peoples), and endorse Christ-like visions of Spotted Owls and Polar Bears they are telling religious (or at least religion-resembling) stories. This helps to illustrate that whether religious in the traditional sense or not, the narratives constructed by sustainability advocates are doing religious work by intentionally facilitating new forms of exchange, providing interpersonal and community cohesion, and focusing the desire of communities of people.21 Such meaning construction occurs among institutionalized and international religious groups as well as within the religious cultural production of countercultures, taking various forms from explicitly religious to seemingly secular. All of these, I argue, are expressions of the religious dimensions of sustainability.

INSTITUTIONAL RELIGIONS AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

Among mainstream religions concern for sustainability (though it was not always called sustainability) began in the mid-1960s when the National Council of Churches convened the Faith-Man-Nature Study Group, focused on transforming Christian attitudes toward nature. In 1966, the World Council of Churches (WCC) launched a 5-year study program devoted to the impacts of technology on society, including components
that attended to environmental effects. The resulting report ‘accepted the thesis of nature’s limits and called for a society that is both just and sustainable’ (Chapman et al. 2000, p. 12). Interestingly then, these ecumenical groups were one of the first to use the term *sustainable* as a shorthand reference for a socially equitable and ecologically responsible global community.

At the UNs’ inception in 1945 the number of organizations accredited through the Committee of Religious Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) (those that characterize their work as religious, spiritual, or ethical) was 42, while today the number stands at over 400 religious NGOs (Neff 2007, quoting Ban Ki-moon; Pigem 2007). While most of Europe has in the past century steered a course toward increasing secularism, traditional religious groups continue to control large proportions of land, capital, and political influence. The influence of these groups influenced former Prime Minister of Great Britain Tony Blair to found a non-profit group called the Tony Blair Faith Foundation dedicated to ‘proving that collaboration among those of different religious faiths can help address some of the world’s most pressing social problems’ (Elliot 2008, p. 27). In this, Blair joins former Soviet Union President Mikhail Gorbachev, founder of a group called ‘Green Cross’, which promotes environmental justice along with a sort of green global spirituality and ethic. Not only are religious groups reaching out to international political institutions and development organizations, but these political bodies and development organizations are reaching back, inviting faith groups to exercise their political will, their economic muscle, and their collective conscience to achieve a more sustainable and just global community.

The ARC has, since its inception, been on the leading edge of programs and initiatives that combine the energies of the UN and the world’s largest faith groups. They have developed several programs dedicated to bringing religious groups, political institutions, and representatives of civil society together to work toward sustainability, including their Sacred Gifts program (in conjunction with the World Wildlife Fund), their Faiths and Biodiversity program (with the World Bank and local religious communities, see Palmer and Finlay 2003), and the Faith and Forests initiative (with the Forest Stewardship Council, the WWF, and religious groups). Perhaps most significantly, in November 2009 the ARC and the UN Development Programme held an event at Windsor Castle (UK) called ‘Many Heavens, One Earth’. This event, hosted by His Royal Highness Prince Philip (UK) and attended by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon and others, will discuss and implement long-term initiatives of the UN and nine global religions aimed at protecting our ‘living planet’.

Ban Ki-Moon has particularly encouraged this evolving relationship between the UN and religious institutions. For instance, in an address to evangelical Christians he quoted a verse from the Hebrew Bible (Isaiah 58:10) to great applause, reminding his audience that service to the poor stands at the center of the Christian vocation. Ban also acknowledged that while the UN necessarily strives to stand outside any particular religious tradition, in a very real sense the UN is itself ‘an instrument of faith…inspired by what unites, not by what divides, the great religions of the world’ (Ban Ki-moon 2007). He went on to note that the key motivation for participating in the quest for a better, more sustainable world was often religious:

If you ask the people who work for the United Nations what motivates them – whether they are building peace in Timor-Leste, fighting human trafficking in Eastern Europe, or battling AIDS in Africa – many reply in a language of faith. They see what they do as a mission, not a job. (Ban Ki-moon 2007)
This focus on ‘what unites us’ illustrates why references to a global civil earth religion might be a frequent accompaniment to UN sustainability discourse. Invoking emotively tied stories that are easily understood as spiritual or religious by many people is one way to stimulate moral sensibilities in a multicultural habitat. As the political theorist Scott Thomas (2005) has argued, the global resurgence of religion and its importance to global politics was stimulated by and integrally related to criticisms of modernity, also often one of the targets of sustainability discourse. Sustainability then, as I have described its history here, is deeply related to and dependent upon the global resurgence of religion in international politics – the emergence of sustainability and the resurgence of religion may be viewed as complementary trends. Such developments indicate that the increasingly important role of religion in international politics deserves more analytical attention, and also highlights the ways in which sustainability discourses are tethered to other political goals and movements. More importantly, these trends may variously reinforce or challenge existing international political hegemony. It is to some counter-hegemonic sustainability-oriented movements that I now turn.

COUNTERCULTURES AND SUSTAINABILITY

Countercultural sustainability movements generally see their primary task as opposing, or hampering the ‘progress’ aimed at by multilateral development organizations (such as the World Bank) or international political regimes (such as the UNs). Nonetheless, they frequently use parallel if not nearly identical motivational tropes, and also cultivate relationships with those outside of their particular communities of accountability for strategic reasons.

Highlighting resistance as the core meaning of sustainability, Jennifer Sumner argued that sustainability is best defined as the creation of a set of structures and processes that invigorate and grow the civil commons. At the heart of the civil commons she imagines ‘the three building blocks of sustainability: counter-hegemony, dialog, and life values’ (Sumner 2005, p. 112). For Sumner, sustainability is defined as an alternative vision that challenges business as usual, existing social structures, and prevailing economic wisdom. More than that, however, Sumner suggests that the search for sustainability is rooted in our affinity for the deep interconnections that comprise the world, and that re-discovering these interconnections may help societies repair damaged relationships with the ecological matrices they depend upon:

empathetic ways of knowing need to be woven into a new understanding of sustainability if we are to survive as a species…they can help foster the kind of relationship with the environment that stresses the interconnectedness of all things. Ultimately, we must come [presumably at a cultural scale] to know what the Buddha said in his first sermon: Everything depends in its origination on everything else at once and in unison. (Sumner 2005, p. 102)

What Sumner envisions as ‘building’ the civil commons is essentially an exercise in recognizing the commonalities among various subcultures of resistance in comparison to the prevailing socio-politico-economic powers. Paul Hawken (2007), immersed for over thirty years in the sustainability milieu, termed this complex cross-fertilization of groups ‘intertwingling’, a new set of partnerships facilitated by technologies and social relations that compress time and space, bringing the world ever closer (p. 5). This parallels trends that the sociologist Colin Campbell first noted in the early 1970s, terming the social setting of this complex transmission of motivational tropes and themes the ‘cultic milieu’ (Campbell 2009, 1972; see also Kaplan & Loow 2002; Garè 1998). Social and
ecological resistance movements, as noted above, find common cause in cultural streams like the sustainability milieu, but their collaboration predates the contemporary emergence of sustainability.

For example, in the United States, many environmentalist subcultures look to Native Americans as bearers of inherently ‘environmental’ ethical perspectives, and as the first real resistance to the colonizing forces that ultimately lay at the root of capitalistic societies. Native American resistance to colonizing cultures enjoyed a revitalization in the late 1960s and 1970s when indigenous rights emerged for the first time onto the international political stage as human rights violations committed in the name of sustainable development became increasingly common. In the United States for example, in 1969, over two hundred Native Americans and supporters occupied the island of Alcatraz for over a year, calling themselves the ‘Indians of All Tribes’ to protest treatment of Native Americans (Deloria 1992, pp. 9–10). In 1973, a standoff at Wounded Knee led by American Indian Movement activists ended in violence, and the arrest of many Lakota and other Native Americans protesting governmental insensitivity to native land rights. It is clear that such episodes impacted both Native American communities and other countercultural constituencies, at least in the United States. Many Native Americans, for example, have taken these events and weaved them into a new narrative of resistance connected to traditional lifeways (see for example Hand 1998).

Sarah Pike, in her study of New Age and Neopagan subcultures, noted that beginning in the 1960s and 1970s both groups drew on Native American traditions to describe different ways of relating to other humans and non-humans (Pike 2004). Bron Taylor has also highlighted the coalitions formed by radical environmentalists and Native American groups, for instance in protest of the construction of large telescopes on the summit of Mount Graham (Arizona, USA), a sacred place for many Apache (Taylor 1997). These and other countercultural movements, though they differ in their basic tenets and foci, tend to exhibit some similarities. Taylor has concluded that many of these subcultures embrace a spirituality of connection which focuses on relationships between human beings, and between humans and the non-human worlds (Taylor 1995, pp. 334–54).

Of course, many questions have been raised about the ‘authenticity’ of such cultural recombination and borrowing, particularly with regard to New Age and Neopagan appropriations of indigenous ritual (Harner 1990; Krech 1999). My intention here is to provide a descriptive analysis of these trends, not to adjudicate whether or not they are instances of ‘authentic’ religion. I want to suggest that the highly political notion of deep interconnectedness and interpersonal encounter has been disseminated through a broad cross-section of grassroots resistance movements as well as mainstream institutions.

Conclusions

In his book Blessed Unrest (2007) Paul Hawken poses a question to the reader:

It has been said that we cannot save our planet unless human kind undergoes a widespread spiritual and religious awakening. In other words, fixes won’t fix unless we fix our souls as well. So let’s ask ourselves this question: Would we recognize a worldwide spiritual awakening if we saw one? Or let me put the question another way: What if there is already in place a large-scale spiritual awakening and we are simply not recognizing it?

He goes on to discuss the ‘Axial Age’, an era when many of the ‘world religions’ were born in a relatively compact region in a short span of time (see for example Susan
Hawken suggests that a new sort of Axial Age is currently emerging, whose first birth pains are the formation of a massive, fluid, and loosely interconnected set of movements that Hawken refers to as ‘the largest movement in the world’. Hawken argued that ‘at the core of all organizations [involved in the movement] are two principles, albeit unstated: first is the Golden Rule; second is the sacredness of all life, whether it be a creature, child, or culture’ (Hawken 2007, p. 186).

Such pronouncements clearly draw on religious imagery. Armstrong’s approach has been critiqued by Russell McCutcheon, who argued that her work was ‘more akin to a theology of religious pluralism than the academic study of religion’ (1997, p. 105; see also 123). Hawken’s project might be critiqued on similar grounds, for his assumption that there exists some essential feature (or set of features) that is definitive of sustainability illustrates that he is promoting the set of values that he would like to see sustained over the long-term. If Armstrong (according to McCutcheon, like Eliade and Otto before her) is advancing a theology of religious pluralism, then Hawken might be said to be advancing a theology of sustainability that has a particular set of goals related to defending particular values.

In his provocative work Contesting Sustainability (2001), Aidan Davison (2001) stated that ‘the appearance of either consensus or intellectual clarity in sustainable development discourses is superficial and deceptive’ (p. 37). Further, in Davison’s estimation, the appropriation of the term by instruments of the dominant culture certainly does not ‘indicate that ecological awareness has been smuggled into the core deliberations of the technological society. It indicates the exact opposite – namely, that the interests of the technological society have been smuggled into ecological awareness’ (Davison 2001, p. 38). The deployment of the term sustainability has a shadow side, and the term and its spiritual accompaniments can be wielded by corporate and government entities to perpetuate existing power structures or to marginalize particular groups.

My goal here was to highlight this religious (and thus highly political) dimension of sustainability discourse, and to point out that these widely divergent groups engage with each other relatively frequently and often use similar language. This overlapping language often takes the form of religious metaphor or story, foregrounds concern for marginal peoples and the freedom to retain particular cultural lifeways, or invokes descriptions of deep biological or cosmological interconnectedness. Given that environmental behaviors are more strongly correlated with political affiliations than with religious commitments (Proctor and Berry 2005), the question remains whether pronouncements from international political institutions, which parallel language used by indigenous and marginalized peoples, heralds genuine change, or whether it is another example of smuggling the agenda of technocratic modernism (to use Davison’s terms) into the discourse of sustainability.

Scholars should not be surprised to find sustainability, which is a contemporary term that refers to the now global preoccupation with species persistence, clothed in religious language. For religious language has historically been used to influence imagination, promote specific behaviors within particular social groups, ensure survival, negotiate peace, make war, and control and distribute resources. I suspect that as sustainability grows into the focus for global governance and development efforts as resource shortages, wars, and unexpected environmental disasters cause unprecedented destruction in an increasingly crowded world, it will be increasingly important to attend to the religious dimension of sustainability, if for no other reason, then to promote a more empathetic engagement with cultural, ethnic, and ethical others for the purpose of reducing suffering and bettering quality of life. Where the religious dimension of sustainability shapes public discourse,
focuses community desire and creates and sustains new forms of exchange it functions in
the public sphere as a political religion.

Short Biography

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Notes

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1 Religion scholar David Chidester (2005) argued that something is doing religious work when it is ‘engaged in negotiating what it means to be human’ (p. 18), and shaping the public sphere by ‘forming community, focusing desire, and facilitating exchange’ (p. 5).

2 I would argue that both religion and sustainability should be only loosely defined for the purposes of scholarly analysis. Utilizing a family resemblances model for defining these terms is one way to provide such a loose definition. The anthropologist Benson Saler and Benthall both utilized Wittgenstein’s (1974) family resemblances model to analyze religion, with Saler suggesting that the term ‘religion’ is an instance of what Wittgenstein called a ‘concept-word.’ For more on defining religion as a set of ‘family resemblances’ see Saler 1999; Benthall 2006, 2008; Vasquez 2008; Taylor 2007, 2010; and Thomas 2005. In such cases arriving at a concrete or agreed upon definition is less important than discerning how the term is being exercised.

3 The religious dimensions of sustainability are exposed in three different, but often co-present forms: (1) the nature-as-sacred religion that resonates within many countercultural groups, (2) religious expression derived from institutionalized religious traditions, and (3) a generic, humanistic civil religion.

4 Lansing’s book is not about sustainable development per se, but his analysis reveals an ancient system of water management that was foreign enough to Western researchers that it went unnoticed until the so-called ‘Green Revolution,’ a set of high-input agricultural strategies often identified with early steps toward sustainable development.

5 Rist (1997) ultimately traces the idea of development, of somehow bettering the human condition, back to Ancient Greece (pp. 25–31) and the elucidation of the idea that there is some directionality and continuity in the process of history (p. 27).

6 On September 25, 1961 Kennedy proposed to the United Nation (UN) General Assembly that they initiate a ‘Decade of Development’ which focused on promoting economic growth (Jolly et al. 2004, p. 85). Kennedy called for a 5% increase in aggregate income per year in the ‘underdeveloped’ countries.

7 The ‘older’ primitivism was championed by the likes of Rousseau and his Romantic-era supporters, mentioned above.

8 Snyder was the real-life referent for Japhy Ryder, the main character of Kerouac’s (1958) The Dharma Bums, and was himself a well-known radical environmentalist and poet and one of the founders of the idea of bioregionalism, which has strongly influenced some sustainability movements (see McGinnis 2005 and Taylor 2005 for more information on Snyder’s central role in the development of bioregionalism). The Engaged Buddhist movement has had a significant influence in North America, particularly in the field of religious studies, with authors such as Kenneth Kraft, Stephanie Kaza, Joanna Macy, and others promoting the coupling of Buddhist practice with environmental concern. For some short introductory pieces see Kaza and Kraft (2000, pp. 237–302 and 353–438).

In essence the document argued that poverty was the causal element in most of the world’s ills, including resource shortages, violent conflict and ecological degradation.

For more on these under-scrutinized sources of some sustainability discourse in international commissions and conferences see Thakur et al. (2005).

Their basic definition is that development is sustainable if it ‘meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (WCED 1987, p. 8).

As Jim McNeill, Secretary-General of the Brundtland Commission stated, ‘the maxim for sustainable development is not “limits to growth”; it is “the growth of limits…many present limits can be expanded, through changes in modes of decision-making, through changes in some domestic and international policies, and through massive investments in human and resource capital’ (quoted in Smith 2005, p. 79).

For example, historian Donald Worster called sustainability (particularly in its manifestation related to development) a ‘magic word of consensus’ (Worster 1993, p. 144), which allowed ‘the capitalist and the socialist, the scientist and the economist, the impoverished masses and the urban elites…[to] happily march together on a straight and easy path, if they did not ask any potentially divisive questions about where they were going’ (pp. 144-5).

The authenticity of the speech has been contested. See Michael McKenzie’s (2005) entry ‘Seattle (Sealth), Chief’ in the Encyclopædia of Religion and Nature (pp. 1,511–2).

The Conference drew together over one hundred heads of state and thousands of other delegates from all over the world and was the largest such gathering of heads of state and government to that time (Rist 1997, p. 188), indicating the high profile concern garnered by environmental and social problems (Baker 2006, p. 55).

The Haudenosaunee is what the Six Nations (Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora) of the Northeastern United States call themselves.

Although its overall contribution to the quest for sustainability is still contested, the Earth Summit did result in five important outcomes: (1) the approval of the Rio Declaration, which included 27 principles of sustainable development (Rist 1997, p. 189); (2) the approval of Agenda 21, a document of over 800 pages which provided sets of guidelines for implementing sustainable development with particular attention to local communities; (3) the creation of the UNs Framework Convention on Climate Change, which drew on the findings of the International Panel on Climate Change; (4) the Convention on Biodiversity, which endorsed the value of indigenous ecological knowledge, and stated that sovereign nations should have rights to the biological resources of their territory; and (5) the Declaration on Forest Principles, which created broad frameworks and recommendations for sustainable use of forest resources.

It is important to note that Darrell Posey, who has played an important role in popularizing traditional ecological knowledge and the importance of indigenous peoples to sustainable development and conservation, has been criticized by other anthropologists for helping to perpetuate rather romantic portraits of indigenous peoples (Parker 1993). To the extent that such criticisms are correct, the idea that a global sustainability ethic is directly related to indigenous cosmologies or some traditional ecological ethics may help perpetuate to a colonialist impulse within international sustainability circles. Anthropologist Eugene Parker (1993), for example, whose work in the Amazon overlapped geographically with Posey’s, has argued that ‘Posey’s research on indigenous resource management strategies is a remarkable house of cards’ (p. 722). This illustrates the contested nature of claims of authenticity related to sustainability and sustainable development.

Like many in Northern Europe and the United States in recent decades, he generally identifies religion with institutional structures and hierarchies, but believes that spirituality is more personal, avoiding some of the pitfalls that accompany organized religion. These distinctions are unimportant to any case I wish to make here, but for further discussion see Benthall 2008 and Taylor 2010, pp. 1–2.

Recall David Chidester’s definition of religious work (p. 1) as anything that binds communities, facilitates exchange and focuses desire (Chidester 2005, p. 5).

The report was officially accepted by the WCC in Bucharest in 1974.

Pigem stated in a footnote that religious groups have been active with the UN since 1972, but UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has pointed out that faith-based NGOs were present at the organization’s founding. Ban Ki-Moon’s statements are drawn from combined press releases offered by the Forum on Religion and Ecology (FORE) each month. This particular communiqué from FORE was received on October 14, 2007.

Blair identified resource access and use as the root of the world’s social problems, and therefore a key focus for religions aimed at promoting social justice.

See http://www.gci.ch/. While Blair’s group focuses on existing institutional religions, Gorbachev’s group promotes a sort of green nature religion with no hierarchy or institutional structure. This indicates the wide variety of religious discourse among institutional religions and international political bodies engaged with sustainability movements.
Representatives from several religious groups and NGOs will attend the meeting, and the faith communities will present their long-term plans. Commitments made by these groups include, ‘all Daoist Temples in China solar powered; creating faith-based eco-labeling systems in Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism; greening all types of religious buildings; protecting sacred forests; developing ethical investment policies; printing sacred books on environmentally friendly paper; creating educational programmes through the faiths’ major role in both formal and informal education’ (from the event website, http://www.windsor2009.org/index.htm, accessed October 28, 2009). For more information about ARC see http://www.arcworld.org.

The verse reads ‘If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday’ (New Revised Standard Version).

In UNEP news clippings, forwarded by the Forum on Religion and Ecology, November 1, 2007.

For further reading, see Pepito and Hatzopoulos (2003), Johnston (1994), Berger (1999), Johnston and Sampson (1994), and Fox and Sandler (2006). Talking another perspective on the increasing importance of religion in international affairs, Michaeilla Bowers (2009) indicates that there has been significant accommodation between Islamism, liberals, and socialists in the Arab world driven primarily by attempts to cooperate with Western regimes militarily, politically or economically.

Summer defines the ‘civil commons,’ drawing on McMurtry, thusly: ‘it is society’s organized and community-funded capacity of universally accessible resources to provide for the life preservation and growth of society’s members and their environmental life-host’ (p. 96, italics in original).

There is significant resonance here with philosopher Aaron Garé’s (1998) claim that counter-hegemonic societal models must join together to create a new meta-narrative. Garé suggested that diverse oppositional subcultures have essentially advocated one of two alternatives to the modern model of human/nature interactions: the cultural model, which assumes that significant shifts in cultural values and priorities are necessary in order to combat the environmental crisis (Garé cited thinkers such as Giambattista Vico, Johann von Herder, Georg W. F. Hegel, and Karl Marx here), and the naturalistic metaphysics model (influenced, Garé said, by thinkers from John Duns Scotus to Baruch Spinoza and Gottfried Leibniz – and I might add Alfred Whitehead, David Bohm, David Ray Griffin, and Fritjof Capra) (Garé 1998, pp. 16–8).

Such violations have always been ongoing, but they came into international political consciousness around the late 1960s. See Wright 1988 for further explanation.

The first contribution from Wounded Knee to the American moral imagination (or conscience) came in 1893 when over 200 women and children and men were killed by federal soldiers for their persistent practice of the Ghost Dance, a millenarian religious movement that enjoyed pan-Indian popularity in the late 1800s. The 1973 incident recalled this deep wrong in profound ways, bridging past events with (then) present affect.

Hand’s Lakota name is Ptè Ole (‘Looks for Buffálo’). Hand traces his lineage back to the Crazy Horse band on one side of his family, and Chief Red Cloud’s band on the other. Brought up on the Pine Ridge reservation, Hand was sent to church schools his whole life and is quite conversant in Christian theology. He has very intentionally generated a hybrid between a particularly subversive interpretation of Christianity and traditional Lakota practice, and has even reached out to some non-Indians with this message. As a result he has garnered significant criticism from his peers on the reservation.

As David Chidester (2005) noted, whether religions are authentic or inauthentic is important, but in both cases they are expressive of personal values, motivate particular behaviors, and are therefore doing real religious work.

The phrase Axial Age was first deployed by Karl Jaspers to refer to the period between 900 BCE and 200 BCE, during which such important figures as Socrates, Elijah, Siddhartha, Confucius, and Lao-Tzu lived. Karen Armstrong’s narrative suggests that many of the world religions arose out of the sociopolitical matrix of that region and time and are basically context-specific enactments of a universal human religious experience.

This is from the subtitle to the book, How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being, and why No One Saw It Coming (Hawken 2007). Although Hawken does not usually refer to these loosely connected movements as sustainability movements, they are constituencies that I would argue are a part of the sustainability milieu.

Davison’s observation may call into question the veracity of statements in international political venues and corporate sustainability pronouncements that invoke dark green religion.

Works Cited


