Introduction

Religion and Ecomodernity

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A “Pastoral Renaissance”?

Religion has long stood at the center of debates on the environmental crisis of late modernity. Some have portrayed it as a malade imaginaire, providing divine legitimation for human domination and predatory exploitation of natural resources; others have looked up to it as an inspirational force that is the essential condition of planetary revival. There is an ongoing battle of the books on the salience of religion in the modern world. Some trendy volumes declare that *God Is Back* (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2009). Others advert to *The End of Faith* (Harris 2004, harp the theme of *The God Delusion* (Dawkins 2006), or claim that *God Is Not Great* (Hitchens 2007). Both sides provide ample evidence to support their adversarial claims. In much of Canada and Western Europe, where religious establishments have courted or colluded with the state, religion has come to be viewed as the enemy of liberty and modernity. Not so in the United States, where the Jeffersonian separation of religion from politics forced religious leaders to compete for the souls of the faithful—and thus to make Christianity more reconcilable with the agenda of modernity, individualism and capitalist enterprise.

There is a subsequent disagreement among scholars as to the role of religion in creating a more earth-friendly world. Some claim that world religions and indigenous belief systems are already responding in highly dynamic ways to ongoing and projected climate changes—both in theory and practice. In the age of environmental, financial, and social crises across the globe, many congregations and religions have been tapping their sacred books to help address the plight of the planet with increased vigor. In *Inspiring Progress*, Michael Gardner (2006) draws attention to the ways in which the green elixir added to religious brew infuses a whole range of projects, from a highly influential, US-based Evangelical Environmental Network to the Interfaith Climate and Energy Initiative and the Eco-Kosher movement in Judaism. There is also a plethora of organizations, from the Alliance of

Religions and Conservation in the UK to the National Religious Partnership for the Environment in the United States, that bring together Protestants, evangelical Protestants, and Jews and attempt to put all their different creeds and activities under one green umbrella.

One of the most enduring, vibrant debates about religious environmentalism has focused on the reenchantment of the efficient, but spiritless, Weberian modernity.¹ Though the fascination with the East persists in postindustrial countries, the time when the Apollonian, rational, and dichotomous mind of the West longed to be fertilized by the rich alluvial flood of Eastern energy seems to be over, and religion-starved souls look more and more to their own, indigenous resources. In *Life Abundant*, Sallie McFague (2001) points to what can be called a “counter-counter-reformation”: religiously inspired environmental projects based on growing things locally, driving on renewables, and educating ecologically literate people. Many religious teaching programs utilize a combination of their holy books and the four sober pillars of the Earth Charter: respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, social and economic justice, democracy, nonviolence, and peace (Bergmann and Gerten 2010, 2011).

What is perhaps most striking about these developments is that, imperceptibly, and at long last, the status of environmentalism—including green religion—has been elevated. From being a marginal, “scoutish” project, it has become a subject for respectable academic research. It is enough to think of an academic program at Yale University in the 1990s that generated the Forum on Religion and Ecology and spawned nine volumes on ecological and religious themes.²

The various manifestations of a renewed religious quest point to a peculiar “pastoral renaissance”—not just a tide of projects and conferences, but the emergence of a new-old mind-set that aspires to reclaiming nature, culture, and spirituality, influencing green architecture, and furthering alternative models of consumption. The pastoral renaissance encompasses a mosaic of visions and ideas. Some are individual, original attempts to name and codify wisdom and practice through which humanity can link, not just with the transcendent, but with all of nature. Witness the Polish ecotheologian Henryk Skolimowski’s recommendation of “the yoga of light”—a spiritual practice that is inspired by Western and Indian traditions and refers to the “Ultimate Source” rather than a personal God (2010). Or note Alan Drengson’s *Wild Way Home* (2010)—a model for a spiritual life for the third millennium that “befriends all forms of wild wisdom” and

brings humanity to its original terrestrial home. These books, visions, and projects inspire churches to revise their theology to encompass ecological concerns.

The notion of the “pastoral renaissance” is not just a metaphor. If the Enlightenment—the fundament of modernity—summoned us out of religion and in to reason, the advocates of the pastoral renaissance—just like their Renaissance predecessors, such as Pico della Mirandola, Erasmus, Shakespeare, and Montaigne—propose to combine reason with spirituality and nature (Witoszek 2008). This new, harmonizing—or rebalancing—trend in the project of modernity needs further consideration. Does it signify the dawn of “ecomodernity”,³ a new phase of high modernity, where reason strives to overcome its separation from the realm of soul and nature?

Religion on Trial

Before answering this question one needs to acknowledge that the world’s religious awakening at the turn of the twenty-first century has not eluded critical scrutiny. In the skeptical responses to green-religious enthusiasm, four arguments are pertinent. The first refers to a secret collusion between God-nature-peace projects and capitalism. Some books on “caring for creation” (Oelschlaeger 1996) overlook faith-based commercial enterprises and often-problematic alliances of religion and predatory big industry in the United States. Slavoj Žižek, with his trickster’s brio, makes an original assault on this communion. “If Weber was alive,” he argues, “he would have written the “Taoist ethics and the spirit of global capitalism” (2006: n.p.). According to Žižek, the fashionable, corporate “Buddhism” that teaches *Gelassenheit* plays the role of moral fig leaf for nakedly rapacious free market forces, both national and international. “Since the Buddhist ontology is based on the assumption that there is no objective reality, why then complain about the financial speculations? After all, the main source of our problems is not objective reality but our greed and attachment to material things” (Žižek 2006: n.p.).⁴

Other critics link the twenty-first-century religious revival in many non-European countries to the resurgence of fundamentalism. For example, Christopher Hitchens, in a famous contention, insisted that organized religion is “violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism, tribalism, and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive to children” (2007: 56).

Not only does it block peace in the Middle East, perpetuating poverty by subjugating women as inferior; it also causes numerous conflicts, including the genocide in super-Christian Rwanda.⁵ In this reading, the very essence of institutionalized religion—a notorious agent of war and destruction—cancels the idea of a blossoming earth and flourishing humanity.

Many critics question the forced nature of the reenchantment of the earth. We need faith, it is said, a resacralization of nature that would change our mechanistic perceptions of the environment. But faith is not acquired by reasoning. One does not fall in love with a woman or enter the womb of a church as a result of logical persuasion. “A faith grows like a tree,” as Arthur Koestler argued. “Its crown points to the sky; its roots grow downwards into the past and are nourished by the dark sap of the ancestral humus” (2001: 15).

The fourth argument, although accepting the green potential of world religions, calls attention to their manipulability. When Lynn T. White Jr., in his famous *j’accuse*, charged Western Christianity with being a manufacturer of the environmental crisis (1967), many were spurned to reinspect various ways in which the ostensibly peace-and-nature loving Eastern religions have been deployed for ideological ends. One can point to the appropriation of Buddhism by Hirohito’s fascism, Burma’s bloody dictatorship, Lon Nol’s army in Cambodia, or the forces in Sri Lanka that savaged the Tamils in the 1950s and 1960s. More recently, Hindutva—a blood-and-soil, exclusive version of Hinduism—has embraced environmental campaigns in a troubling way (Mawdsley 2005).

In short, religion provides a contested toolbox in the project of a transition to a sustainable world. Is the dawn of a pastoral renaissance yet another providentialist illusion?

Conservative-Revolutionary Sacrum

Regardless of these assaults, many observers suggest that ecological stability, global justice, and the human future are profoundly religious issues (e.g., Egri 1999; Drengson 2010; Taylor 2010). The paradigm shift cannot happen—and be sustained—without going deep into the realm of values and belief. It is argued that religion has a particular capacity to generate social capital, the bonds of trust, communication, cooperation, and information. As a vehicle of value-charged stories, religion is a close partner in the human search for meaning. It

answers human desire for transcendence, orders the world, provides comfort, and carries sanctions. “Among the institutions of our society, only the communities of faith can still posit some reason for human existence rather than constant accumulation of stuff,” insists Bill McKibben (2009). The Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski has gone so far as to claim that “[c]ulture, when it loses its sacred sense loses all sense” (1990: 70). To reject the sacred, that is, to claim that everything is profane, undermines one of the crucial distinctions on which every culture rests. It leads to a structural void where there is no distinction between the sacred and the profane, war and peace, executioner and victim, invasion and liberation, equality and despotism. For Kolakowski, religion is the center that holds.

Intriguingly, history shows that religious sentiment has been political dynamite. Modern revolutions—from the Khomeini turnover in Iran and the Polish *Solidarność* to the Arab Spring—have been closely bound with religious allegiances and symbols (Shinn 1982). There is, then, an intrinsic paradox feeding the innovative potential of religions. Their natural tendency is to conserve and preserve, not to inspire change. The sacred order, which encompasses the realities of the secular world, has never ceased, implicitly or explicitly, to proclaim the message that “this is how things are and they cannot be otherwise”. And yet, in numerous social upheavals, God’s teachings have been invoked to ignite a social transformation.

This paradoxical, conserving-transforming role of religions is highly pertinent in the context of the green transition. For there is no doubt that there is a link here. The sustainable mind-set—very much like the religious one—is about limits to human pursuits and appetites. There is an affinity between the two value agendas, and it has been eloquently spelled out by Daniel Bell, a thinker who, in an almost clairvoyant fashion, predicted the trajectory of late modernity. Already in the 1970s Bell stated:

The theme of Modernism was the word beyond: beyond nature, beyond culture, beyond tragedy—that was where the self-infiniting spirit was driving the radical self. We are now groping for a new vocabulary whose key word seems to be limits: a limit to growth, a limit to spoliation of environment, a limit to arms, a limit to torture, a limit to hubris—can we extend the list? (Bell [1980] 1991: 349)

In Bell’s view,

the ground of religion is not regulative, functional property of society, serving, as Marx or Durkheim argued, as a component of social control or integration. Nor is religion a property of human nature, as argued by Friedrich

Schleiermacher, Rudolf Otto, and religious phenomenologists such as Max Scheller. The ground of religion is existential; the awareness of the finiteness and the inexorable limits to human powers, and the consequent effort to find a coherent answer to reconcile them to that human condition. (Bell [1980] 1991: 251)

Similarly, Leszek Kolakowski, in the seminal and half-forgotten essay “The Revenge of the Sacred in the Secular Culture,” argued that “perceiving religion as no more effective than magic, a mere technique in covering the gaps in our knowledge and practical abilities is the functionalist Durkheimian and cognitive Marxian fallacy” (Kolakowski 1990: 64–65). For Kolakowski, religion testifies to the limits of human perfectability and thus to the inescapable fiasco of all men-like-gods projects.

Religion is man’s way of accepting life as an inevitable defeat. That it is not an inevitable defeat is a claim that cannot be defended in good faith ... The utopia of man’s perfect autonomy and the hope of unlimited perfection may be the most sufficient instruments of suicide ever to have been invented by human culture ... To reject the sacred is to reject our own limits. (Kolakowski 1997: 73)

As I have suggested, this is a value platform that gestures toward the Renaissance period because, while it embraces modernity and its aspirations, it also advocates the importance of self-imposed limitations. Its early eloquent advocates were Leonardo da Vinci, Michael Montaigne, William Shakespeare, Pico della Mirandola, and Niccolò Machiavelli, who all promoted innovation and yet warned against man’s hubris, preaching restraint on human appetites and ambitions (e.g., Toulmin 1990: 80; Witoszek 2008; 2014). The main leitmotif of most Renaissance thinkers and writers—celebration of an individual and his potential—was balanced by the obsession with human weakness and warnings about downfall due to uncontrollable lust for power and glory.

This religiously inspired appeal for measure is salient in most religions, from Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism to the beliefs of most indigenous people. Perhaps it is no accident that the practitioners of the green transition return to religion and philosophy as tools of restraint?

But there is more at stake here than a (re)emergence of ecological religion. According to Bell, the future religions will return to the past and

search for those threads which can give a person a set of ties that place him in the continuity of the living, the dead and those yet to be born. Unlike ro-

manticism it will not be a turn to nature, and unlike modernity it will not be the involuted self; it will be the resurrection of Memory. (Bell [1980] 1991: 359)

There are many signs that corroborate this augury. The resurgence of memory and tradition in the twenty-first century is both a response to growing insecurities caused by the roller coaster of globalization, and to the environmental, economic, and political turbulence in many parts of the world. In situations of threat, the questions of roots and identity become burning, while the memory of ancestors and the shift to the spiritual realm are manifestations of the search for comfort and defense against dangers from the outside. In this context, the greening of religions means, in effect, reclaiming nature, culture, and spirituality as aspects of the same, threatened commons. The question is: How widely spread is this religious-ecological turn? Has it reached the countries of the wealthy—and staunchly secular—northern Europe, or even communist China?

Religion and Sustainability in Norway, China, Ghana, and India

The objective of this issue is to explore to what extent the resurgence of cultural memory is combined with religious innovation for sustainability in the postindustrial West, the fast-growing political giants such as China, and the struggling economies in Africa. In what ways does the dawn of the pastoral renaissance nourish the self-limiting environmental upheaval in countries as disparate as Norway, Ghana, China, and India? Does religion in wealthy, superdemocratic, and mostly secular Norway—a country illuminated by an afterglow of a “politically correct” Protestant God—play any role in cultural mobilization for a sustainable future?

Almost all our contributions offer critical and defamiliarizing perspectives on this question. As is shown by Jens Bjelland Grønvold, not only does institutionalized religion spearhead in surprising ways the green awakening in Norway; young Norwegian theologians also advocate biocentric theology—one in which all of God’s creations are equally important—and the wisdom of the indigenous traditions in northern Norway as the way forward for the Protestant Church.

The return to memory combined with religious renewal is highly intriguing in China, where the Chinese Daoist Association has undertaken an ambitious project to promote Daoism as China’s “green re-

ligion". As James Miller shows, this "green Daoism" is not designed to restore a Karate Kid utopia of humans living in harmony with nature. Rather, it buttresses a nationalist agenda of patriotism and scientific progress. This seems to be how conservation and nature protection function at the official level in China: as a beneficial side effect of an ideological project that appropriates sacred sites that are located in areas of outstanding natural beauty.

Ben-Willie Kwaku Golo and Joseph Awetori Yaro's study of a greening of religion in a quintessentially religious country like Ghana demonstrates that there is a growing, public sense of connection between climate crisis and the abandonment of traditional norms and obligations toward nature. This crisis, the Ghanaians insist, springs both from a disregard for the pre-Christian perceptions of nature's sanctity, and/or the abandonment of Christian and Islamic injunctions that invoke the ideas of stewardship and trusteeship. Predictably, the African spiritual "infidelities" have been mostly attributed to the effect of Western cultural intrusion. The basis for a sustainable future, according to many informants, is the return to the Ghanaian tradition and to the ideas of stewardship, which figure both in the Islamic and Christian traditions. The critical question is: is this mere rhetoric and wishful thinking?

India offers a cache of religious traditions that have both informed the ideas of retreat from the material world and inspired numerous civic projects reclaiming nature and culture (Sanford 2011).⁶ How to square and interpret these two opposing trends? One of the most productive religious inspirations for the project of a sustainable future is, according to Yamini Narayanan, the *purusharthas*, a potential foundation for an active stance founded on a "dharmic sustainability". The *purusharthas*—or the fourfold path to self-realization—accept material and sensuous experience and advocate concrete action as stages in an ecocentric self-realization (see also Næss 1990: 10). Achieving spiritual depth and insight, compassion, and integrity is not just a program of meditation and retreat, but also concrete practical action that improves the here and now, as Ghandi has shown.

All four contributions point to religious creed as an actual or potential vehicle of a dawning ecomodernity. Even the green Daoism in China—steered and manipulated as it is by the almighty state—is not just about state ideology; it is linked to the ideas of environmental protection and conservation. The question about the potency of this return to religion, memory, and identity is pertinent nevertheless. In one of the most iconic films of the century, *Avatar*, we see humanity's

dream of an ensouled, networked world that emanates spiritual bioluminescence. On the planet of Pandora, a tribe of Na'vi worships the Tree of Souls—the center of the Na'vi's culture and religion. The Na'vi believe that the tree allows them to communicate directly with Eywa, their mother goddess. The roots of the tree form a special network with other trees and plants, which in turn are connected to each other, and generate a gigantic, neural interconnection between forms of life on Pandora. But most importantly, the tree preserves people's memories and experiences, and in turn shares them with those who connect themselves to it. In short, the tree is the temple and the library of the Na'vi.

There is just one hitch. While the film captures human yearning for transcending places, cultures, and the bodies that define us, it also captures the twisted nature of the dream of an earth-friendly world. The Na'vi are admirably precivilized and yet superbly hypercivilized, antitechnological and highly technologized. Implicit in their world is the view of religion as an addition to, or support of, the networked technological revolution that allows the Na'vi to connect with nature. The Tree of Souls is the spiritual peak of this revolution. Does this mean that the condition of a transition to the psychoenvironmental century is the right technology and adequate gadgets, not a change of consciousness?

The next problem, registered by *Avatar*, springs from human longing for a shortcut to the magical world of unity with nature, a technological fix – such as neuronc tendrils in Na'vi's braids – that would allow us to feel what the plants feel and connect with our forefathers. The proverbial discount of the future is here joined with the desire for instant gratification without hard spiritual and intellectual work required by religious teachings. The final challenge springs from the pressure of the powerful and predatory carbon- and nuclear modernity with its standard rhetorics of necessity, growth, and job-creation to justify further depletion of the planet.

It remains to be seen if China's green Daoism, Norwegian biocentric theology, Ghanaian syncretic stewardship, and/or Indian dharma are the foundations of change, and if the global pastoral renaissance has staying power. The opposite trend—based on the negative politicization of religion and its link with fundamentalist resurgences in the countries of North Africa, Pakistan, and Afghanistan—remains a crucial hurdle on the way to ecomodernity. One thing is certain: in the emerging battle of modernities, religion has a crucial role to play, whether God is a delusion or not.

Acknowledgment

This volume has been inspired by research pertaining to the CERES21 project based at the Center for Development and the Environment, the University of Oslo, Norway. The editor wishes to thank the Norwegian Research Council for its support.

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Notes

1. See especially *What Would Jesus Drive?* an environmental campaign of the Evangelical Environmental Network, at <http://www.whatwouldjesusdrive.co> (accessed 1 February 2013). See also Moyers (2006).

2. See the Forum on Religion and Ecology's website at <http://fore.research.yale.edu>.

3. The term "ecomodernity" is here loosely defined as a new stage of modernity that advocates a shift from unrestrained growth to sustainable development simultaneously at three levels: in culture, by combining the legacy of humanism with ecological wisdom and holistic thinking and practices; in industry, by highlighting renewable energy and a postcarbon economy; and in politics, by advancing the ideas of sustainable development, partnered governance, human rights, and eradicating ecocide. See Nina Witoszek and Atle Midttun (2012).

4. Žižek holds that this is how Eastern spirituality has become a fetish that allows Western executives to "participate in the capitalist game while at the same time preserving the sense that they are not involved, and that what they really care for is their inner richness" (2006).

5. Preliminary results of the audience's votes after a discussion posted on the Munk Debates website show that the majority sided with Hitchens, with 68 percent saying that religion is more a destructive than a benign force in the world (Noronha 2010).

6. For example, the twelfth Gyalwang Drukpa, spiritual head of the Drukpa lineage, has embarked on *padyatra* (journey by foot) with 750 monks, nuns, and other disciples from Manali to Leh to spread awareness about the hazards of nonbiodegradable waste and treatment of kerosene burns, a common domestic accident in Himalayan villages. Ditto Akal Takhat, the highest Sikh temporal body, has embraced the "save

the environment" mantra, telling Sikhs across the globe that it is their moral and religious duty to take care of nature. And Baba Ramdev is leading a campaign to clean the Ganga from its source in Gangotri to Ganga Sagar, where it drains into the Bay of Bengal. See <http://www.gits4u.com/envo/envo21.htm> (accessed 1 February 2013).

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