

Religion and environmental behaviour (part one): World religions and the fate of the Earth

Most religious individuals and groups do not express and promote pro-environmental values and behavior but increasing numbers of individuals, and subsets within religious traditions, do. Consequently, some observers perceive that a 'greening of religion' is underway that promises to make significant contributions to the construction of sustainable societies. Social scientific research is less sanguine, however, finding that the lack of pro-environmental activities by the vast majority of religionists is due in part to religious beliefs, practices and priorities that hinder environmental understanding and concern. Extant research further shows that even those religionists with environmental concerns generally retain an anthropocentric bias and confine their felt obligations within the sphere of individual virtue ethics. Largely outside of the world's predominant religions, however, there are nature spiritualities with ecocentric values prioritizing biodiversity conservation and radical social transformation. Nevertheless, the best available evidence (reviewed here and in the next issue of *The Ecological Citizen*) indicates it is unlikely that religions of any sort will significantly slow, let alone prevent, the current, accelerating extinction event, and the concomitant collapse of Earth's still wildly diverse biocultural systems.

Every earthly thing we care about, including our closest kin and hopes for equitable and sustainable social systems, depends on the health and resilience of Earth's environmental systems. If we do not successfully address our environmental predicaments, it will be impossible to solve a myriad of other problems we face, let alone debate and pursue social arrangements that could lead to the flourishing of our own and other species. For this reason the central research question I have sought to answer is: *What might lead humanity to stop degrading Earth's environmental systems?* If this question can be answered, then we would retain the opportunity to pursue a host of other good things.

If the answer to this question were easy, many individuals and organizations would undertake ameliorative efforts, including those needed to overcome ignorance and opposition. Unfortunately, the answer is obscure, because environmental and social systems are incredibly complicated and entangled, so much so that it makes sense to refer to them, as scholars increasingly have, as *biocultural systems*

(e.g. Winkelmann and Baker, 2008). Given the huge number of variables in such systems it is far easier to identify associations than causal relationships. Consequently, scholars studying environment-related human behaviour typically focus on only a few of the factors that might influence the ways humans shape and impact, and in turn are shaped and impacted by, the environments they inhabit.

As an interdisciplinary scholar I have sought to incorporate diverse views and studies into my understanding of environment-related human behaviour. I have been especially focused on the ways that religion – understood broadly to include the affective and what some call the spiritual experiences of humankind – influences values, practices and Earth's living systems.

The ferment over religion and environmental behaviour'

For a number of reasons I took this focus early in my career: First, because I understood that religions typically reinforce but sometimes disrupt existing values, social arrangements

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“Another reason for taking the potential of such greening seriously is compelling evidence produced by evolutionary theorists (including environmental anthropologists) that religious beliefs and practices have often evolved in ways that are both socially and ecologically adaptive.”

and ecosystems. Second, because of scholarly analyses that argued, variously, that this or that religion, or all religions or subsets of them, hinder or promote pro-environmental behaviour. Third, because when studying the environmental movements in North America that had emerged forcefully in the 1960s, I discovered that certain scholarly arguments had become widely accepted – in particular, arguments that claimed that Abrahamic religions (especially Christianity, given its prominence and power in the West) produced environmentally destructive attitudes and behaviours, while indigenous traditions and religions originating in Asia (especially Daoism and Buddhism) were more ecologically friendly (Taylor, 1991). Fourth, beginning in the late 1980s, I noticed that some individuals and groups affiliated with world religions – by which herein I mean the world’s largest and predominant ones – believed that the religious traditions they belonged to or studied – at least if properly understood or revised in the light of contemporary understandings – promote environmentally friendly values and behaviours. Some also averred that a powerful ‘religious environmentalism’ and a ‘greening of religion’ was underway, even if this trend was, as yet, only nascent.

Reflecting on all this as a young scholar with an activist background, who had studied and seen first-hand that sometimes religious individuals and groups effectively promote social justice, I thought, perhaps they would eventually join the cause of environmental protection.² This issue of *The Ecological Citizen* exemplifies the long-standing ferment about the role of religion in environmental behaviour, as well as the hopes of many that religion might become a positive environmental force, and perhaps even promote ecocentrism.³

To many, such hopes seemed all the more plausible when, in March 2013, after his election to the Roman Catholic Church’s Chair of St Peter, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio chose ‘Francis I’ as his papal name, honouring St Francis of Assisi while signalling his intention to prioritize care for the poor and the environment. In this, he was clearly influenced by Brazilian

liberation theologian Leonardo Boff (1995) and (ironically) perhaps as well by Lynn White Jr, the most famous critic of Christian environmental attitudes and behaviours. White contended as well that because religion was the root of the environmental crisis “the remedy must also be religions,” concluding his seminal paper with the provocative remark, “I propose Francis as a patron saint for ecologists” (1967: 1207). Pope John Paul II apparently accepted this advice and did precisely that in 1979; Bergoglio took the idea further.

Soon after his election, in May 2014 Pope Francis invited prominent environmental scientists to a workshop, and in June of the following year, he issued *Laudato Si’: On care for our common home*, an encyclical that made a religious and ethical case for environmental protection (Pope Francis, 2015). Those who hoped or thought that a greening of religion was underway took this as further evidence, while some natural scientists who had been involved in the 2014 workshop expressed similar hopes.

As a close observer of sincere efforts to promote the greening of religion and claims to the effect that such a greening was underway, I recognized that these views needed to be taken seriously. In many cases these claims were being advanced by individuals who had extensive experience with and within world religions, interfaith organizations and even, in some cases, within prominent international and political enclaves. Even the World Bank has supported greening of religion efforts (Palmer and Finlay, 2003), as have institutions under the United Nations umbrella, including UNESCO and the UNEP, which in 2016, for example, co-sponsored with the Islamic Republic of Iran an International Seminar on Environment, Culture and Religion (UNESCO and UNEP, 2017).⁴ Another reason for taking the potential of such greening seriously is compelling evidence produced by evolutionary theorists (including environmental anthropologists) that religious beliefs and practices have often evolved in ways that are both socially and

ecologically adaptive; that is, they promote the diversity and resilience of biocultural systems.⁵

Over time, however, it became clear to me that the evidence of positive co-evolution between religious, environmental and social systems was compelling primarily with regard to small scale, pre-industrial societies – precisely those societies that are being overrun by large-scale, ever-expanding industrial civilizations. Moreover, assertions about the greening of religion were largely based on statements by religious and political elites, or were based on efforts being made by small numbers of individuals and groups within the world's predominant religious traditions. I did not see much evidence that significant proportions of religious individuals within these traditions were following suit. Given this, I wondered whether the hopes, dreams, assumptions and social locations of those making such pronouncements were a result of what social scientists call 'observer bias', making it difficult for them to notice disconfirming evidence. I also became aware that some of those working to precipitate a greening of religion considered the making of optimistic statements that it was happening to be a strategy to *make* it happen through a sort of 'band-wagon' effect. Consequently, through my own experience and experiences reported to me by others, I learned that some involved in these efforts did not welcome evidence-based scepticism, and considered it counterproductive.

Despite my concern that greening-of-religion enthusiasts were getting ahead of the facts, I shared their hope that the green shoots that were sprouting from world religions would mature into a powerful force for environmental sustainability. To evaluate such claims, and thinking that research might illuminate ways to hasten such greening, I reframed assertions that it was significantly underway as 'The Greening of Religion Hypothesis'. In concert with others I have sought to review, inspire and contribute to research that would illuminate what would most effectively promote such greening.

I shall now summarize my current understandings about the role of religion in biocultural systems. My primary focus will be on whether world religions have inspired, or might inspire, dramatic *political* mobilization to protect and defend the Earth's ecosystems, rather than on which individuals or groups typically have greater or less *per capita* environmental impact.

World religions and environmental behaviour

Religious individuals and groups sometimes protect biodiversity and ecosystem resilience but more often do not. When they do, it is often through processes in which religious beliefs and practices co-evolve in ways that are ecologically and socially adaptive.

Anthropologist Roy Rappaport put this idea provocatively, arguing that religious rituals are "neither more nor less than part of the behavioural repertoire employed by an aggregate of organisms in adjusting to its environment" (Rappaport, 1979: 28). Such understandings have been buttressed by evolutionary 'group selection' theorists who argue (controversially but plausibly) that natural selection favours not only the fittest individual organisms but also the best adapted social groups.⁶ The studies purporting to show religion contributing to adaptive biocultural systems, however, have tended to be about indigenous, small-scale foraging societies, and sometimes pastoral and larger pre-industrial agricultures.⁵ There is far less evidence that religion is playing an ecologically adaptive role in large, industrialized civilizations, which universally consider economic growth to be a central organizing principle, if not their *raison d'être* – regardless of which economic system is in force, or which religions are most influential in such societies.

There are, however, individual members and subsets within world religions that consider the protection of nature a religious and ethical duty. There are even examples in which poor people affiliated with world religions draw on their traditions while resisting ecologically destructive

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enterprises (Taylor, 1995). They do not typically enjoy widespread support from their fellow religionists and usually are defeated and remain marginalized. More typically, those striving to bring about the greening of their own and world religions generally are from relatively well-educated and thus scientifically literate sectors of the societies in which they are situated; they also tend to be more affluent and liberal than religious traditionalists – where by ‘liberal’ I mean more willing to modify long-standing religious teachings in the light of contemporary understandings. These environmentally concerned religionists have increased in number, and some of them have created religious environmental movement organizations (REMOS), which have gained public attention. This is why some observers think that a significant and promising greening of religion is underway.

Historical and social scientific research, however, is less sanguine. It is well established that the vast majority of religionists are not environmentally concerned, or at least do not make it a priority to reduce their environmental impacts or engage in collective action to promote environmentally sustainable societies. This is due in part to religious beliefs and related priorities that hinder environmental understanding and concern. Too rarely discussed are the ways some religions enjoin practices that have negative environmental consequences. Unsurprisingly, it is difficult to dislodge practices that are invested with sacred meaning (Wexler, 2016).

Another common aspect of many world religions that hinders environmental concern are beliefs that the world was made and is maintained by a powerful deity or deities. For those with such beliefs, a sensible strategy to ensure beneficent environments and avoid environmental dangers is to please or appease the nature-controlling being or beings through prayer or religious rituals. This is why ritual sacrifice, real and symbolic, has been so common in the history of religion. When religious approaches to secure favourable environmental

conditions fail, religionists have often blamed some person or group (usually from another religion or social group), or some evil spiritual being or force, for offending the nature-controlling deity. Such perceptions sometimes lead to efforts to eliminate the offence and restore environmentally favourable conditions by suppressing the offending individual or group. Whether after failed efforts to secure favourable environments in these ways, or through religious metaphysics that view current realities to be the irreversible and just deserts for past behaviours, such beliefs and practices tend to produce fatalism and resignation rather than ameliorative actions.

Research also has shown that other variables, such as political and economic ideologies, are often far more important than religious ones in shaping environmental attitudes and behaviours. Indeed, such ideologies are often entangled with religious systems; consequently, challenges to the former can be considered tantamount to an assault on sacred beliefs and values. Even those religionists who have sincere environmental concerns tend to retain anthropocentric biases, such as, that human beings are morally more valuable and spirituality more advanced than other organisms. With such beliefs concern for non-human organisms and ecosystems depends on whether these are critical for human well-being. Moreover, it is generally the case that even the most passionate religious environmentalists confine their felt obligations and priorities to the sphere of individual virtue ethics. Such ethics enjoin efforts to reduce consumption and waste on a personal level and can lead to local efforts to protect and restore ecosystems, rescue animals and so forth. Few environmentally concerned religious leaders and laypeople, however, take strong political stands or challenge existing economic systems. With good reason or direct experience, they fear that if they did so they would lose friends, status and, consequently, monetary support. This fear is common among pastors and others responsible for local religious bodies, who

usually can ill afford to lose members and their financial contributions.

According to Ellingson (2016) these dynamics also hinder the efforts of those working within faith-based and interfaith REMOs to encourage religious environmental concern and action. These individuals typically feel that to be effective, they must be considered ‘credible’ by their constituencies. To do this, REMO advocates must emphasize fidelity to their religious tradition, and tailor their messages to cohere with already existing beliefs, values and priorities, or convincingly argue that, when ‘properly’ understood, their religions consider protecting the environment to be a religious duty. Ellingson found that this strategic necessity limits religious innovation – it makes it more difficult to incorporate understandings from scientists and relevant insights or practices from other religious traditions – while also hindering interfaith alliances and collaborations with secular scientists and environmentalists.⁷

Whether environmentally concerned religionists are leaders, laypeople or REMO advocates, they face similar and daunting challenges. Ellingson reluctantly concluded that REMOs were unlikely to convince significant numbers of religious individuals and groups to prioritize environmental causes, especially those that are “not purely focused on alleviating human suffering and meeting human needs” (2016: 155). And religious individuals and groups, as explained previously, are especially unlikely to challenge existing political and economic systems – even though, nearly everywhere, these systems are unsustainable, stressed and, in many regions, already in the process, or at the brink, of collapse.

Outside of the world’s predominant religions, however, there are those with nature-based religions and spiritualities who have ecocentric values and prioritize biodiversity conservation. In many societies, these actors are increasingly numerous, influential and engaged in political activities promoting radical social transformation. They are even influencing some environmental advocates within the world’s predominant religions to embrace

more ecocentric values, move beyond individual virtue ethics and become more politically active. I will explore these promising trends in the next issue of *The Ecological Citizen* as I shift focus from world religions to dark green religion and the fate of the Earth. ■

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Notes

- 1 For more details of the extensive research underpinning this overview, see this cultural history (Taylor, 2016a), the related comprehensive review (Taylor *et al.*, 2016), and this study of ecocentric spiritualities (Taylor, 2010). Other particularly helpful sources include Taylor (2005), Sponsel (2012; 2014), Johnston (2013), Veldman *et al.* (2014) and Berry (2015). Most of my publications are available at www.brontaylor.com.
- 2 For my own path to ecocentrism and interest in religion and social change see Taylor (2019).
- 3 For a representative argument in *The Ecological Citizen* defining and promoting ecocentric values, to which I also contributed, see Washington *et al.* (2017).
- 4 For a description of this event see Taylor (2016b); for the role of religion at United Nations Earth Summits see Taylor *et al.* (2005); for an insider’s recollection of his work facilitating the religion-infused *Earth Charter* see Rockefeller (2008).
- 5 The extensive literature includes Rappaport (1979; 1999), Wilson (2002), Berkes (2008), Winkelmann and Baker (2008), Whyte *et al.* (2016) and Nelson and Shilling (2018).
- 6 For a lucid introduction to such theory see Wilson (2002).
- 7 I saw a good example of this at a 2012 forum organized by the WWF’s Sacred Earth Program in Washington, DC, USA. During it, I heard one Catholic climate change activist tell those gathered that he needed their scientific information but would have to remove information that

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showed it was from this environmental group for the information to be considered credible. I also learned that many scientists in the WWF considered wasteful the funds spent on this effort to influence religions.

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