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RELIGION AND ECOLOGY: PERSPECTIVES ON ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY ACROSS RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

Issue Editors: Almut-Barbara Renger, Juliane Stork and Philipp Öhlmann

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Religion and Ecology: Perspectives on Environment and Sustainability Across Religious Traditions

Issue Editors

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Religion and Ecology: Perspectives on Environment and Sustainability across Religious Traditions

Editorial

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Abstract

This editorial introduces *Religion & Development* Vol. 2, Issue 3 – Special Issue on "Religion and Ecology: Perspectives on Environment and Sustainability across Religious Traditions." The articles delve into the intricate relationship between religion and ecology from diverse perspectives. The prevailing academic discourse on religion and ecology is centered on three fundamental aspects. Firstly, it underscores the potential of religious communities to actively combat climate change by shaping worldviews and guiding community and personal activities. Secondly, it scrutinizes the practical implementation of these contributions by religious communities, exploring both obstacles and facilitators for their environmental engagement. Lastly, it emphasizes

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how religious communities furnish theological and spiritual arguments in support of environmental protection, thereby motivating believers to take proactive measures. This special issue contributes to these ongoing discussions by presenting insights from all three perspectives, enhancing the discourse with distinctive viewpoints from Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, African Traditional Religions, Indigenous Religious Traditions, and interfaith perspectives. The incorporation of diverse religious traditions complements recent dialogues on development and sustainability, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the intersection between religion and ecology.

Keywords

religion and ecology – climate change – environmental engagement – sustainable development – interfaith – comparative religion

This special issue on "Religion and Ecology: Perspectives on Environment and Sustainability across Religious Traditions" explores perspectives on ecology in a range of religious traditions. Contributing to the academic field of religion and ecology as well as the debate on religion and (sustainable) development, the issue includes six articles written by distinguished experts: Iyad Abumoghli, James Amanze, Lidia Guzy, Tava Hirosh-Samuelson, Dan Smyer Yü, and Emma Tomalin.

The field of religion and ecology has recently been gaining increasing interest within the domains of religious studies and theology, predominantly due to heightened current public discourse surrounding climate change. However, scholarly discussions on this topic have been taking place for several decades. One of the early milestones in the Christian context was the Fifth General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi in 1975, in which debates on sustainability played an important role. The call for a "sustainable global society" surfaced in many of the assembly's debates (WCC 1975), echoing the Club of Rome's startling and famous findings on the "Limits to Growth" in 1972 (Meadows et al. 1972). Likewise, academic scholarship began to engage with the role of religion and culture for ecological sustainability and the environment – sparked inter alia by historian Lynn White's famous hypothesis on Christian religious roots of the ecological crisis (White 1967). Since then a vivid field of research on the relationship of religion and ecology has emerged, which has seen particularly dynamic growth in recent years and cross-fertilizes with the debate on religion and sustainable development

(Öhlmann and Swart 2022). At the same time, an "ecological turn" (Öhlmann and Swart 2022, 312) indicating increased concern with the environment and ecological sustainability is visible in many religious communities themselves. One aspect of this ecological turn are the frequent new theological texts on climate change and environmental degradation that have emerged in the past years (The Holy Father Francis 2015; "The Time to Act Is Now: A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change" 2015; "Islamic Declaration on Climate Change" 2015). Taylor prominently coined the term "greening of religion hypothesis" (2011, 254) to describe the increasing body of scholarship arguing that ecology is becoming more and more central to religious communities – to the point of some maintaining that "world religion has entered into an 'ecological phase' in which environmental concern takes its place alongside more traditional religious focus on sexual morality, ritual, helping the poor, and preaching the word of God" (Gottlieb 2006, 6). Empirical evidence on the greening of religion is, however, mixed (Taylor, Van Wieren, and Zaleha 2016) and it remains up for debate how sharp the ecological turn really is.

The current academic discussion on religion and ecology focuses mainly on three issues. Firstly, establishing that religious communities have the potential to significantly contribute to combating climate change by shaping worldviews and providing guidance for community and personal activities (Gottlieb 2006; Tucker 2009). Secondly, empirically analyzing whether religious communities are effectively implementing these contributions, as well as deciphering the hindrances and enablers for the environmental engagement by religious communities (Nche 2020; Köhrsen, Blanc, and F. Huber 2022). Thirdly, religious communities offer theological and/or spiritual arguments in support of environmental protection, urging believers to take action (e.g., Gräb-Schmidt 2015; Vogt 2021). This special issue presents contributions from all three strands of argumentation, therefore engaging in ongoing debates regarding religion and ecology.

In their respective contributions, the authors provide valuable insights regarding the linkages between religion on the one hand and ecology, environmental sustainability, and the environment on the other.[1] The religious traditions presented in this special issue offer unique perspectives on environmental issues. As much of the religion and ecology debate has focused on Christianity

1 While the primary focus of this special issue is on ecological sustainability, we as editors as well as the authors acknowledge that sustainability also encompasses social and economic dimensions. As such, this special collection focuses on the interplay between religion and ecological sustainability, but also includes the social and economic/political aspects of the debates on sustainability and ecology.

and Islam, we made the deliberate decision to enrich the debate by elucidating the topic with perspectives on Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism, and the at times marginalized perspectives of African Traditional Religion and Indigenous Religious Traditions, and to include interfaith perspectives. In this way, this special issue also complements *Religion & Development*'s recent special issue on "Care for the Poor, Care for the Earth: Christian-Muslim Dialogue on Development" edited by Séverine Deneulin and Masooda Bano, which focuses on Christian–Muslim Dialogues on development and sustainability (cf. Deneulin and Bano 2023).

The present issue is based on a Lecture Series on Religion and Ecology in 2022 hosted by the three issue editors as a cooperation between Forum Internationale Wissenschaft at the University of Bonn and the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development (RCSD) at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. It took place in the context of the International Network on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development (IN//RCSD), specifically in the framework of the South African–German Research Hub on Religion and Sustainability (SAGRaS). All three editors are part of the Research Programme RCSD as well as the SAGRaS project. Through the initiative for this special issue and the lecture series it emerged from, we seek to contribute to further the IN//RCSD network's aim

> to actively contribute to finding solutions to the fundamental challenges of our time. The IN//RCSD does so with a focus on religious communities in different contexts – investigating their potential to foster development, equality, social cohesion and ecological sustainability, but also analyzing their role as possible sources of exclusion and marginalization. (IN//RCSD n.d.)

In 2021/22, when Almut-Barbara Renger was invited to the Forum Internationale Wissenschaft of the University of Bonn as a Visiting Professor for Religion and Society, Philipp Öhlmann went to the University of Botswana as Alexander von Humboldt Foundation Feodor Lynen Research Fellow, and Juliane Stork continued her fellowship as John S. Mbiti Research Fellow in the Research Programme RCSD, we took the opportunity to expand our cooperation. Together, we organized a seminar for master's students on the topic of religion and sustainability and invited international guests to a lecture series on religion and ecology, which took place digitally between Berlin and Bonn on May 20, June 25, and July 8, 2022. Through the SAGRaS and the editors' institutional affiliations, the lecture series was linked inter alia to the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Botswana, the Faculty of

Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria, and the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Basel. In the lecture series, key international experts from academia and practice were invited to speak about different religious perspectives on ecological sustainability. The lectures constitute the basis of the articles in this special issue and are accessible on YouTube.[2] In the following, we provide brief summaries of the six articles in this issue.

Dan Smyer Yü's article is a contribution to the debate about whether we are living in a geological epoch that is primarily influenced by humans. This debate began at least as early as 2000, when atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen, Nobel laureate, and botanist Eugene F. Stoermer argued that the world has entered a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. Smyer Yü takes up the debate with the aim of initiating what he terms a "public theology of the Anthropocene." He starts by noting the growing traction of religious practices and academic research on the environment as part of a global push to cultivate new environmental ethics. As an example, Smyer Yü cites the UN Environment Programme's Faith for Earth Initiative, which suggests that religious and spiritual convictions provide valuable insight for protecting and conserving our planet. In this regard, the author considers it vital for a public theology of the Anthropocene to investigate the environmental values and ecological implications of religious and spiritual views of the planet as "sacred" and "sentient." In pursuit of this aim, he compares Buddhist and Christian approaches to environmental sustainability as case studies. He contends that the Christian notion of "the sacred" and the Buddhist perception of "sentience" as the fundamental essence animating all life on Earth are complementary from a theological and ecological perspective. Together, he argues, they provide a spiritually dynamic understanding of "deep time," a scientific concept that allows the intrinsic value of the Earth as a living planet to be recognized. Smyer Yü emphasizes how important he believes it is for humans, whose religious traditions are comparatively young compared to the 4.5-billion-year-old Earth, to come to such an understanding. In his view, the Christian and Buddhist sense of the sacredness and sentience of the Earth is a gateway to a deeper ethical understanding and emotional appreciation for "the life of the Earth."

In her article, **Hava Tirosh-Samuelson** provides an overview of Jewish theological environmental positions and of Jewish environmental initiatives since the 1970s. Focusing on the USA, she describes official Jewish environmental

2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMDn9FrZ1ig&list=PLflnFQxEIn96g1ziGsl4q_dwXZ6hX7Zqy.

resolutions, environmental activities, and the academic discourse on Judaism and ecology. Tirosh-Samuelson finds a distinctive Judaic perspective on the environment and points out that the "development of the physical world is religiously permissible" if it coheres "with the ethical values and legal principles of Judaism." The Jewish environmental initiatives she highlights concentrate on education, identity formation and community-building, advocacy work, and the food and farming movement in the USA. Tirosh-Samuelson underlines the significance of environmental concerns in contemporary Judaism amid the escalating environmental crisis. Contemporary Judaism, she shows, is reinterpreting religious texts, formulating new eco-theologies, and rethinking traditional rituals as a response to climate change. As part of this, Jewish environmentalists are using the social justice concepts of *tzedek* (justice) and of *tikkum olam* (repair of the world) to sustain their claims for environmental protection. Although, in her opinion, a cohesive environmental movement cannot be made out as it is only a small cadre of a few hundred Jewish environmental activists that run the activities, Tirosh-Samuelson finds overall an increased Jewish environmental sensibility. However, she also recognizes persistent challenges to the Jewish environmental movement, like the decentralized structure of American Jewry.

Lidia Guzy's article posits the substantial value inherent in indigenous practices for shaping the future trajectory of our planet, a perspective that is progressively gaining recognition. Recent research indicates that ancient methods of cultivating crops, managing forest fires, and safeguarding endangered species, some of which extend back millennia, harbor considerable potential for mitigating what is frequently termed "the decline of nature." Guzy amplifies this viewpoint by delving into the dynamic oral culture of shamanic worldviews and life worlds, where indigenous wisdom is conveyed through dreams and visions, songs, performances, and trance dances. Theoretically and empirically grounding her discourse in extensive comparative studies conducted in rural areas of Odisha, India, she focuses on local eco-cosmological perspectives manifest in trance traditions, construing these as manifestations of contemporary shamanic worldviews and conduits for the transmission of indigenous knowledge. Cited examples encompass the shamanic traditions of the *nag bacca* (snake children) and the *alekh gurumai* (ritual specialists), which Guzy portrays as instances of transformative healing through trance rituals founded on both the concepts of sacred madness and sacred play (*baaya/kheelo*) and on rites of spirit possession (*boil*). Guzy advocates for the acknowledgment of such manifestations of shamanism as "eco-cosmologies," a term she uses to delineate indigenous knowledge systems on sustainability. According to Guzy, eco-cosmologies embody a non-dualistic perspective on human and nonhuman actors within a shared world and cosmos. This perspective is deemed

particularly invaluable by Guzy due to the perilous separation between humans and nonhumans instigated by the modern rationalization project. This schism has concurrently accompanied the idealization of the scientific and materialist worldview within urban Western knowledge cultures, thereby marginalizing indigenous knowledge resources and eco-cosmological worldviews. In contrast, Guzy contends that indigenous knowledge traditions and ritual practices are pivotal in realizing sustainable solutions conducive to fostering cultural and eco-biological diversity and reciprocity at both local and global echelons. She posits that these practices facilitate the integration of diverse perspectives from humans, nonhuman entities, and other-than-human elements.

In a similar vein, the contribution by **James N. Amanze** explores the intricate relationship between African Traditional Religions and environmental conservation. Employing Mircea Eliade's concept of the sacred, the article underlines profound differences between African and Western perceptions of sacredness, emphasizing the holistic veneration of nature in African religious traditions. African conceptions of the sacred, as Amanze argues, stand in contrast to Western dichotomies of the sacred and the profane. In African contexts, spiritual realms of life intersect with other realms such as the social, political, economic, and, significantly, the environmental. Particularly the environment and nature are considered to have an inherent sacrality. This sacrality is for instance visible through specific taboos, notions of the sacredness of specific plants, places, or animals, religious guidelines for using environmental resources, and religious rituals relating to nature. According to Amanze, the interconnectedness of the social, physical, and spiritual realms characteristic for African Traditional Religious worldviews emphasizes being "in communion" with the natural environment instead of dominating it, which has contributed to safeguarding the diverse flora and fauna in many African communities. He provides various brief case studies on this from different contexts across the continent. However, Amanze argues that the efficacy of African Traditional Religions in environmental preservation has eroded. He contends that secularization, Western-style modernization, and extractivist exploitation of natural resources have contributed to what he calls a process of desacralization, in which the sacredness of the environment in African societies has been fading. This is further exacerbated by climate-change-induced destruction of the natural environment. Lastly, Amanze's arguments also resonate with those of White (1967) in that he sees Christianity, with its emphasis on dominating nature (rather than living in community with it), as contributing to and legitimizing the destruction of the environment. In summary, the article vividly shows the potential of African Traditional Religions for environmental protection and ecological sustainability inherent in its notions of the sacredness of

nature. At the same time, however, it highlights the obstructions in realizing this potential, in essence caused by a marginalization of African Traditional Religious belief systems.

Emma Tomalin's article examines the construction of an environmentally friendly Hinduism within the religion and ecology discourses. As a scholar specializing in religion and development, Tomalin positions her analysis of Hindu Nationalism within the broader field of religion and development. She criticizes the construction of a romanticized and essentialized Hinduism that is purportedly inherently eco-friendly. Tomalin views this portrayal of Hinduism as problematic, asserting that it does little to advance climate change policies and instead perpetuates a "myth of primitive ecological wisdom" stemming from a yearning for an "imagined pre-colonial and pre-industrial past." She critiques the political dimension of these discourses, citing the example of how Hinduism in India is being greenwashed by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Hindu Nationalism movement. This "neo-traditionalist" approach, according to Tomalin, primarily serves political rather than environmental goals. She unpacks how Hinduism has been widely constructed as environmentally friendly and how this notion is being deliberately strengthened and appropriated by the BJP. Tomalin also illustrates how the construction of an ostensibly environmentally friendly Hindu Nationalism adversely affects more sustainable traditional communities in India, particularly focusing on nomadic pastoralism and Adivasi tribal economies, along with their religio-cultural traditions. She demonstrates how the government has in fact supported the spread of the market economy instead of more sustainable alternatives while using the image of a traditional and environmentally friendly Hinduism to better their image. Through this critical analysis, Tomalin's article provides a significant counterpoint to the generally positive outlook on ecological engagement in religions presented in other articles in this special issue. Tomalin unfolds pointedly how the timely topic of religious environmental engagement can be misused to achieve other (political) means.

Finally, we are delighted that with **Iyad Abumoghli**'s contribution this special issue also includes a policy and practice note. With this shorter, crispy format, the journal seeks to provide a platform for in-depth reflections from and on policy and practice in the field of religion and development, aiming to expand the knowledge exchange between policy, practice, and academia. There could hardly be anyone better suited than Iyad Abumoghli, as the director of the United Nations Environment Programme's Faith for Earth Initiative, to contribute a policy and practice note to this special issue. In his article, Abumoghli

argues that religions, values, and ethical systems have a highly important role in addressing the complex ecological challenges and in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015). According to Abumoghli, in addition to the three prominent dimensions of sustainability – economic, social, ecological – the fourth dimension of sustainability, the cultural, has received too little attention. It encompasses values and ethics, traditional knowledge as well as religion and spirituality. Not including these factors constitutes a missed opportunity. Importantly, the author underscores the fact that the world does not have to deal with one ecological crisis. Rather, there is a triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. This triple crisis can only be dealt with if the dominant paradigm largely driven by industrialization and economic growth changes. As Abumoghli points out, this requires science and technology, appropriate global policies, but also religious values, beliefs, and ethical principles: religious communities, beliefs, ethics, and values play a crucial role in effecting a transformational shift toward sustainability. Based on several examples from different religious traditions, the article contends that religions across the world share a common value system in their mutual concern for the environment. Abumoghli calls for putting this concern into practice and integrating religious values and ethics with science and technology and global policy to work toward the major paradigm shifts needed for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution as the triple ecological crisis.

Overall, the articles show that religious communities can provide important impetus in the global debate on the ecological crisis. This finding is currently reflected not least by the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28), which took place in Dubai from November 30 to December 12, 2023. Faith-based organizations and religious leaders were strongly represented at the conference with their own faith pavilion (UNEP Faith for Earth 2023). Their common aim was to demonstrate that religious communities are essential in the fight against climate change and for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the goals of the Paris Agreement. Of course, whether they will be achieved remains to be seen.

This special issue demonstrates the potentials and the ways in which different religious traditions can respond to the escalating and manifold global ecological challenges. This is an important finding in view of the need for humanity to search for social, cultural, and moral forces that can raise awareness, shift global policies, and produce action against the current ecological predicament. Given the urgency of environmental and climate action, transdisciplinary academic research on the nexus of religion, ecology, and

sustainability has a crucial role to play. Studies such as the ones in this special issue help to determine the extent to which religious actors and communities see it as their duty to protect and preserve the environment and engage in the fight against climate change, thus contributing to sustainability – or whether they work in the opposite direction. Moreover, academic research in this field provides an important basis for the formulation of policy and of creating multiple-stakeholder approaches to the ecological crises. It is our hope that as academics we thereby are able to point toward the ethical responsibility of sustainability in global policy, public administration, the economy and, not least, individual behavior and to make a contribution to solving one of the major challenges of our time.

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A Public Theology of the Anthropocene: The Earth's Deep Freedom

Research Article

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Abstract

The environmental engagement of religious practices and academic research is becoming a formidable trend of global endeavors for building new environmental ethics in the Anthropocene, the currently human-induced geological state of the earth. This trend is predictable given the demographic fact that over 80% of the world's population consist of different religious traditions. The UNEP Faith for Earth Initiative attests to this diversely represented, spiritual approach to rethinking the geological and ecological meanings of being human in the 21st century. In this context, this article is intended to initiate what the author calls a public theology of the Anthropocene to discuss the ecological implications and environmental values of religiously and spiritually conceived understandings of the Earth as sacred and sentient. To this end, it comparatively takes Buddhist and Christian approaches to environmental sustainability as case studies and argues that, theologically and environmentally complementary to one another, the Christian idea of the sacred and the Buddhist notion of sentience offer geologically- and ecologically-lively spiritual understandings of the scientific concept of Deep Time, regarding the intrinsic value of the Earth with a life of her own.

Keywords

public theology – the Anthropocene – sacred – sentience – Deep Freedom – indigenous Earth

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1 Introduction

Since its inception at the turn of the twenty-first century, the Anthropocene or the human epoch of the Earth, proposed by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer (2000), has spread beyond earth sciences like wildfire. It compels social scientists, humanities scholars, and the public to rethink humankind as a geological force (Haraway 2015; Trischler 2016; Moore 2016; Chakrabarty 2021) that is transforming the Earth's climate patterns and ecosystems in both destructively creative and creatively destructive fashions (Smyer Yü 2023). Although it is being debated among earth scientists as a hypothesis, an argument, and a concept (Ruddiman 2013 and 2017; Zalasiewicz et al. 2011 and 2019) concerning its cause and periodization, the Anthropocene has nevertheless been accepted as an ecogeological indicator suggesting the ending of the Holocene and the beginning of a human-induced geological cycle (McNeill and Engelke 2014; Bonneuil and Fressoz 2017; Chakrabarty 2018). The idea of the Anthropocene is observably accelerating new interdisciplinary approaches and public debates concerning the fate of the Earth and the meanings of sustainable development. As eighty percent of the world's people are religious (UNEP 2008), scholars of religious studies and members of faith-based public institutions are equally active players in exploring new ways of building a sustainable, just, and peaceful future. The launch of the Faith for Earth Initiative of the United Nations Environmental Programme in 2017 attests to the critical importance of religious and spiritual understandings of the Earth in the public arena of environmental advocacy and policymaking.

In response to UNEP's Faith for Earth Initiative and as an answer to the call for religious and cosmological understandings of the Earth's history (Brown 2007; Christian 2011; Swimme and Tucker 2011; Dean-Drummond et al. 2018), I propose a public theology of the Anthropocene for a threefold purpose: to discern geological meanings of the sacred, and spiritual meanings of the geological Earth; to explore the ethical common good from the mutual embodiments of matter and spirit in diverse terrestrial lifeworlds; and to assess the value of faith-based, affective knowledge of the Earth in the public discourse of sustainable futures. In conversing with ecotheology (Northcott 2015; Kearns and Keller 2007), religious ecology (Grim and Tucker 2014), and spiritual ecology (Sponsel 2012), the conceptual gravity of this proposed public theology is found in the mutual embodiment of *theo* and *geo* – the spiritual worlds of divinity and the material worlds of Planet Earth. It thus unites earth sciences and public imagination to push the limits of human religious consciousness of the Earth into the unimaginably ancient prehuman times characterized as "Big History" (Brown 2007; Christian 2011) and Deep Time (Hutton 1795;

Black 2021; Gordon 2021), in which the universe is found to be 13 billion years old and the Earth 4.5 billion years old. This added Deep Time thinking leads to a theo-geological understanding of what I call the "Deep Freedom" of the Earth or the Earth's innate environmental freedom, with an inherent part of the Earth's livingness and moral considerability discussed in the field of environmental ethics (Keller 2010; Callicott 2013).

This proposed public theology is built upon a comparative study of contemporaneous Christian and Buddhist environmentalisms since the 1970s. As Ian Harris (1995) observed three decades ago, their comparability, to be elaborated shortly, is based on their concurrently antithetical and syncretistical entanglements with each other and with the public concern of the global environmental crisis. By making this interfaith comparability more legible, I demonstrate the mutual complementarity of Christian and Buddhist environmentalisms in the arenas of global environmental advocacy and scholarly debate on the role of religions in the understanding of the intrinsic value of the Earth as a living planet and in the growing momentum of faith-based Earth stewardship. This particular complementarity is identified in the Christian sense of the Earth's sacredness and the Buddhist perception of sentience as the fundamental essence that animates all life forms on Earth and ensouls landforms in places where Buddhism and indigenous religious customs are syncretized. Admittedly, from the scientific perspective, humans and our religious traditions are comparatively young in contrast to the 4.5-billion-year-old Earth; however, the Christian and Buddhist senses of the sacredness and the sentience of the Earth are a gateway to deeper ethical understandings of and affective appreciation for the life of the Earth.

2 Buddhist and Christian Environmentalisms in the Anthropocene

In the earth sciences, the Anthropocene hypothesis currently has three versions being debated concerning its dating and primary cause. Crutzen and Stoermer's version regards the industrial adoption of fossil fuels in the late eighteenth century as the starting point of the Anthropocene, while Jan Zalasiewicz's group looks at the drastic increase of carbon dioxide in the 1950s as the Anthropocenic triggering point (Zalasiewicz et al. 2019). William Ruddiman's "early anthropogenic hypothesis" pushes the dates of the Anthropocene to seven thousand years ago when human-caused deforestation, wet rice farming, and animal husbandry began to increase the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere (Ruddiman 2017). In my own work linking the Little Ice Age, Eurasian human migration, and the Industrial Revolution,

I lean toward Crutzen and Stoermer's assessment that the transition from non-fossil to fossil fuels on the industrial scale in the late 1700s marks the beginning of the Anthropocene (Smyer Yü 2023).

While the debates are ongoing among earth scientists, the Anthropocene hypothesis has prompted some scientists to celebrate humankind as "a species with planet-wide powers and breathtaking gifts" (Ackerman 2015, 310) and to perceive human geological agency as "human power over the fate of the planet" (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016, 16). It provokes others to critically examine both "the promise and pitfall" (Nixon 2020, 6) of this human-induced geological epoch. The creative and destructive tendencies of the Anthropocene are concurrently recognized beyond the scientific world. Noticeably, the Anthropocene is coeval with historically emerging environmental-thought trends and movements, and with the presently robust environmental discourses. The first generation of modern environmental thinkers, such as John Ruskin, William Morris, John Muir, and Henry David Thoreau, were all prolific and outspoken authors during the Industrial Revolution. These thinkers did not coin the word "Anthropocene" but their works undeniably point to the anthropogenic nature of industrialization – a notion that would become the source of Anthropocenic consciousness. Interestingly, many of these early modern environmental thinkers, such as Muir and Thoreau, had personal backgrounds or interests in different religious traditions, and very few of them openly based their environmental thoughts in one particular religious system. They impress contemporary scholars as nature mystics (Sponsel 2012) rather than religious ecologists or ecotheologians.

Modern religious environmentalisms took shape nearly a century later, coinciding with landmark events like the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, the United Nations' call for sustainable development in 1987 (WCED 1987), and the UN's designation of April 22 as Earth Day in 1970 (later rephrased as International Mother Earth Day in 2009). Among Christian institutions and public figures, the Roman Catholic Church is known for the consistent, global environmental engagements of its seven successive popes since the mid-twentieth century, from Pope John XIII (1958–1963) to Pope Francis (2013–present), whereas the global visibility of Protestant churches' environmental engagements appears to have begun three decades later than their Catholic counterparts, starting mostly in the mid-late 1990s (Hitzhusen 2019, 27). This does not mean that Protestant theologians were less concerned about global environmental issues, but may have more to do with the Catholic Church's centralized institutional system, its home base – Vatican City – being a sovereign state that favors the global spread of its environmental messages and proposed actions through the United Nations and international

venues. Given the Vatican's sustained global record of environmental engagement, it is discernible that the six popes in office from the 1960s to the present have consistently advocated the interdependence of humans and nature, and promoted care for the poor, indigenous rights, and environmental justice in economic development. In particular, the writings and public speeches of Popes Paul VI (1963–1978), John Paul II (1978–2005), Benedict XVI (2005–2013), and Francis (2013–present) share a clear theme of laying out the causal relationship between modern ecological crises and human moral problems. Paul VI condemned the industrial exploitation of nature (Paul VI 1971); John Paul II advocated environmental conservation for human flourishing; Benedict XVI proposed a human ecology as a relational understanding of humankind on Earth as God's creation, and Francis recently proposed an integral ecology that deepens his successors' call for environmental conservation as the basis of inclusive, fair, and just human flourishing (Lai and Tortajada 2021).

In comparison, modern Buddhist environmentalism on the global scale did not start in Asia, the original home of a variety of Buddhist traditions; instead, it began with the spread of Buddhism to the West. Japanese Zen, Tibetan Vajrayana, and Vietnamese Mahayana traditions are responsible for the initial and the formative phases of Buddhist environmental movements across the planet. D.T. Suzuki's systematic introduction of Japanese Zen Buddhism to Americans through his publications and lectures in the first decade of the last century laid the foundation of the social and environmental activisms initiated from American Zen centers, notably San Francisco Zen Center and Buddhist Peace Fellowship in Berkeley.

On a larger scale, leading North American Buddhist scholars such as Joanna Macy (2007), Stephanie Kaza and Kenneth Craft (2000), and Allan Hunt-Badiner (1990) are responsible for the systematic articulation and promulgation of Buddhist environmentalism. Their Buddhist practice is not merely replication of Asian Buddhist traditions; instead, it entails innovation, transformation, and engagements with modern science and the public, all centered on the pressing issues of the contemporary world such as climate change and environmental crisis. The foundation of the global Buddhist environmentalism they initiated rests upon the Buddha's teaching on *paticca samuppada* or dependent co-origination; however, it no longer narrowly focuses on the karma of an individual person but is directed toward a full engagement with collective suffering. With her academic background in systems theory, Macy innovatively rephrased *paticca samuppada* as "radical interdependence" and gave it new meanings with an emphasis on "the living web of natural systems" and "[its] uncovering [of] our wider identity with the living planet itself" (Macy 1979, 1992). Macy's "radical interdependence" is observably the

cornerstone of global Buddhist environmentalism. This, of course, does not imply that Asian Dharma teachers have no role in shaping Buddhist environmental movements worldwide.

The 14th Dalai Lama (1935–) of Tibet and Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022), respectively in exile in India and France, have not only spread the Buddha's teachings across the world, but are also known for their sustained environmental engagements. The Dalai Lama's environmentalism is centered upon what he calls *chi-sem* or "universal responsibilities" in an effort to rebalance human-Earth relations and be attentive to the wellbeing of all sentient beings (HHDL 2021, 42; 1999, 162). *Chi-sem* culminates in his "beyond religion" (HHDL 2011) approach to the health of the Earth as "our only home" (HHDL 2021) and his reaching out to Pope Francis' integral ecology and to the scientific understanding of climate change and modern environmental challenges (Francis 2015). His environmental advocacy is grounded in Buddhist teachings of compassion for all living beings that does not confine itself within Buddhism.

Thich Nhat Hanh offered his environmental teachings through "engaged Buddhism" and "interbeing," the two generative concepts he innovated to underscore Buddhism's capacity to address human sufferings in social and political terms, and to highlight the interdependent nature of all life communities on Earth (Nhat Hanh 2021, 57). Like the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh had close engagements with scientists and scholars on pressing anthropogenic issues related to the environment and the suffering of nonhuman species. He was frequently referenced in the academic field of religion and ecology because of his systematic teachings on the ecospiritual dimension of Buddhism. Like the Dalai Lama, he was also a prolific author who inspired millions of contemporary environmentalists with his publications.

On the global scale, it is the worldwide environmental crisis that has drawn Christian and Buddhist environmentalists together – a togetherness that has not yet been fully acknowledged by either side. In the 1960s, while accusing Christianity of being the historical roots of the global ecological crisis, Lynn White Jr. inferred the nature-friendliness of Buddhism embraced by the beatniks then (White Jr. 1967, 1206). Unintentionally or intentionally, White's generalized and unsupported allegation pitted Christianity and Buddhism against each other in the environmental arena. At the same time, as Harris observed, the liberal aspect of Christianity had an influence on how Buddhists were reaching out to the public in the West in the manner of "Protestant Buddhism". (Harris 1995, 177)

Harris made an important observation about the "family resemblance" (1991, 180) between Buddhist environmentalism and its liberal Christian

counterparts in terms of social engagements and the concept of environmental justice. This was not the first time such interreligious influence was noted: in the nineteenth century, Theravada Buddhism encountered Christianity introduced by the British to Sri Lanka, and Anagarika Dharmapala's anti-colonial Buddhist movement became the first iteration of what would come to be known as Protestant Buddhism for its emphasis on this-worldly engagement (Johnson 2004, 71; Obeyesekere 1970, 55; Ames 1963, 49). Protestant Buddhism or similar modern versions of Buddhist practices are commonly known among scholars as Buddhist modernism (McMahan 2008; Smyer Yü 2020a). Buddhist environmentalism initiated from North America can be considered to be part of Buddhist modern practices that bear the signature of Protestant social activism on the one hand and that are influenced by modern scientific findings on the other.

While the leading North American Buddhists are indebted to their Asian Dharma teachers' mentorship, the leading Asian Buddhist environmentalists, such as the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh, are socially and culturally environed in the Christian ethos of Europe and North America and surrounded by their students who frequently have had a Christian upbringing, who update themselves with new global environmental issues, and/or are well-versed in modern scientific explanations and approaches to the environment. It is inevitable that the environmental speeches and texts of the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh are compelled to be interreligiously accessible and to contribute their Buddhist approaches to the global call for saving Planet Earth (Dalai Lama 2017; Nhat Hanh 2013 and 2021). The Dalai Lama's recent coauthored book – *Our Only Home: A Climate Appeal to the World* – explicitly connects his "oneness of humanity" with Pope Francis' "our common home" (Dalai Lama and Alt 2021; Francis 2015). The environmental common ground of the Pope, the Dalai Lama, and Thich Nhat Hanh is the physical Earth as a mother (Francis 2015, 4; Dalai Lama 2017 and 2021; Nhat Hanh 2021). The Earth has thus become the meeting place of Christian and Buddhist environmentalists beyond their respective canon-bound, human-centered doctrines.

As Mother Earth cements the togetherness of Christian and Buddhist environmentalisms, the inception and ensuing trend of modern faith-based environmentalisms by Catholic popes and Buddhist public figures characteristically reveals a compassionate attentiveness to the suffering of both humans and nonhumans, and an ecumenical and interfaith outreach to other religious traditions and to the wider secular society beyond their own constituencies (Francis 2015; Thich 2013; HHDL 2021). Given their persistent, open engagements with modern science and secular politics, the environmentalisms of Christianity and Buddhism are complementary to each other. Yet, neither has

sought a greater alliance with the other in the public arena of environmental discourses and in the policymaking world. At the same time, in parallel, each of the two human-centered world religions is being reinterpreted and repositioned toward becoming what I call "more-than-human religions" that take the ecological endangerment of the Earth as the central concern of their theological and spiritual responses to global climate change and environmental crisis. Thus, claims of their focus on ecologically oriented theologies and spiritually understood ecologies are the current trends of many socially engaged religious figures and their institutions, academic research, and environmental policy instruments, including the UN's Faith for Earth (UNEP 2017), the Yale Forum for Religion and Ecology (Yale N.D.), and the Catholic Church's initiative of "Go Green by 2050" (Gori 2020). The affective approaches to sustainable living in the field of religion and ecology are making an impact in environmental studies and public discourses (Tucker and Grim 2001; Smyer Yü 2020).

3 Ecological Meanings of the Sacred in Christianity

Christian environmental public engagement and theological development are currently undergoing a visible ecological turn. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, publications on ecotheology by Christian theologians and scholars of religion and ecology have been numerous, including works such as Ernst M. Conradie's *Christianity and Ecological Theology* (2006), Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller's *Ecospirit: Religion, Philosophy, and the Earth* (2007), Willis Jenkins' *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (2008), Anne Marie Dalton and Henry C. Simmons' *Ecotheology and the Practice of Hope* (2010), Ignatius Schweitzer's *The Green Popes: Benedict XVI and John Paul II on the Environment* (2010), and Pope Francis' *Laudato si': On Care for Our Common Home* (2015). In many ways, these publications mark a new era of Christian theological engagement with the pressing ecological issues of our time. The common characteristic of these ecotheological texts is that ecotheology is a Christian theology; however, its ecological and geological centeredness brings the physical Earth and its animal and plant residents, not just humankind, to the center stage of Christianity's environmental concerns and its diverse theological debates. Christian ecotheologians demonstrate their openness to converse with scientific findings and with non-Christian ecoreligious knowledge systems.

Diversely expressed, the ecological turn of Christian theology in this century is characteristically grounded in the sacredness of the Earth as a divine creation. This planetary sacredness comes alive with the original, geological,

biological, ecological bond of divinity, humanity, and the worlds of other species. The presence of divinity did not cease after the creation of the Earth and all life communities; instead, its creativity is alive in the physical Earth and in the bodies and souls of plants, animals, and humans. This common trend among Christian theological responses to environmental changes coincides with the overall global environmental debates centered on the notion of being human on Earth as an ecological species (Rose et al. 2012; Haraway 2008; Smyer Yü 2020b). It intermingles with non-Christian ecological and conservation concepts and practices. It is thus interfaith, publicly engaging, and resolved to contribute to new environmental ethics and conservation acts. Yet, it retains its Christian orientation.

For example, the integral ecology recently proposed by Pope Francis in his *Laudato si'* (Francis 2015) is emblematic of the deepened understanding and appreciation of Earth's ecology-centered sacredness among current Christian environmentalists and scholars. While Pope Francis reaffirms the ecological value of the Christian creation story, *Laudato si'* builds an actionable, interfaith alliance with public policy instruments and the fields of the sciences and humanities to focus clearly on the pressing issues of our time such as climate change, indigenous rights, and endangerment to the sustenance of multiple species. The foundational tenet of integral ecology is what Pope Francis calls the "integrating vision" or "a broader vision of reality" that reaffirms "how everything is interconnected," how "we are part of nature," and how ecosystems have their own "intrinsic value independent of their usefulness" to humans (Francis 2015, 105). The spirituality of this Christian integral ecology serves what Pope Francis calls "the principle of the common good" for impartial world peace and the wholesomeness of individual human societies (Francis 2015, 116). Unlike his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI's "ecology of man" (Benedict XVI 2011), Pope Francis' integral ecology is rooted in Saint Francis of Assisi's vision of the Earth as an animate planet. *Laudato si'* begins with Saint Francis' Canticle of the Creatures, quoting this section:

> Praise be to you, my Lord, through our *Sister, Mother Earth*, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs. (Francis 2015, 3; Francis 1999, 113–114)

The added emphasis is meant to point out that the openness of Pope Francis' integral ecology is grounded in his willingness to connect Christian belief with a panhuman religious-spiritual understanding of the Earth as the living maternal source nourishing everything and everyone. Reverence for the Earth as the mother of all is common among indigenous beliefs, Christian theologians in

the academic world, and many culturally engaged earth scientists. Many indigenous beliefs that have survived their peoples' conversion to Christianity attest to the resilience of this panhuman reverence for the Earth as a mother, a goddess, or an animate source of sustenance and nourishment (de la Cadena 2015; Lepcha 2021; *Carreño* 2021). Likewise, relevant to the discussion here, the interconnectedness of everything prompted in integral ecology naturally finds a common ground with the Buddhist concept of interdependence.

Regarding the Earth being cherished as a maternal figure, it did not take long for Christian theologians to see the ecological and geological relevance of Lovelock's (1995) and Margulis' (1998) Gaia hypothesis, which posited the Earth to be a self-regulating system. A growing number of Christian ecotheologians have also adopted Gaia, an indigenous European Earth goddess, to illustrate the livingness of the Earth (Smyer Yü 2020a). Anne Primavesi, a prominent Christian systematic theologian and ecotheologian, is exemplary in her full engagement with the Gaia hypothesis to interlink Christian theology with geohistory for the sake of emphasizing God as "emerging from earthly knowledge and firmly situated there" in contrast to God as "transcendent, unaccountable, omniscient, all-powerful and non-locatable in relation to the earth" (Primavesi 2009, 17). Divinity in Christian ecotheology is thus considered to be geological and ecological.

The ecological and geological meanings of the sacred among the works of Christian environmental scholars and public figures are expressed through a pattern of the intertwinement of the material and the spiritual worlds. Thus, ecogeological meanings are to be found in the mutual embodiment of matter and spirit; as both hold divine origin and are inextricably alive in one another, they are one. For the sake of theological and intellectual convenience, their oneness is understood in the language of "two" – two in one, and/or one-begetting-many. Prominent Christian environmental theologians and practitioners of sustainable living, like Thomas Berry, Anne Primavesi, Wendell Berry, and Norman Wirzba, ground their ecotheological and ecophilosophical visions in the creation story of the Earth and human-nonhuman relations. Their theologies of the Earth begin with the elemental materials shown in Genesis – the embryonic deep, wind, water, and light – making the habitability of the Earth's surface. These materials of divine origin are the prerequisites for the forthcoming births of plants, animals, and humans.

God's creation of the first human vividly demonstrates life as the union of matter and spirit: "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). Animals were created before humans, though no detailed

account of how they became living beings is given; however, it is reasonable to infer that animals were given diverse bodies into which God breathed the same breath of life. It is to be emphasized that the first three sentences of Genesis suggest the preexistence of land, air, and water in the imageries of "the face of the deep," "a wind from God," and "the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:1–3) before the creation of the first plants, animals, and humans. Similar to the scientifically conceived Big History or the history of the universe and the Earth (Brown 2007; Christian 2011), the Christian creation story suggests a continuing process of life-giving, life-taking, and life-transforming with God's creativity symbiotically materialized with land, water, and air. These three elemental materials have woven together the Earth and the sky, and give life forms to all living beings.

The intertwinement of the elemental materials and the spiritual presence of God is thus the foundation of Christian ecological understanding of the Earth as a life-giving gift from God. The sacredness of the ecological Earth lies in the God-given "maternal principle" (Berry 2009, 75) or "mothership" (Bailey 1916, 9). This planetary sacredness is synonymous with the earthly presence of God and thus makes the physical Earth animate and life-generating.

The Christian ecological approach to the sacredness of the Earth unavoidably connects the biblical creation story with the ever-expanding geohistorical, ecohistorical, and biohistorical understandings of the Earth and multispecies relations that are explored in the academic world and public discourse. It is particularly noteworthy to point out Christian ecotheologians' adoption of the social-scientific concept "new materialism" that regards "materials as lively and self-organizing," and finds "the shared materiality of all things," reaffirming that "we are vital materiality and we are surrounded by it" (Bennett 2010, 10, 13–14). When it is applied and expanded in the ecotheological realm, social-scientific-oriented new materialism emphasizes the intertwinement of living beings, inanimate objects, the agency of matter (Keller and Rubenstein 2017, 1, 5), and the animacy of matter (Rubenstein 2017, 157). The theological interpretive advantage naturally allows ecotheologians to spell out explicitly what makes the vitality of matter possible. It is the "holy spirit – *ruach* or *pneuma*, breath and wind of life" (Kearns and Keller 2007, 3) that endows livingness and creativity to the material world. This theologically revised new materialism is a Christian spiritual experience of the physical Earth made alive by the essence and energy of God. The entire Earth, or her diverse environments such as mountains, rivers, and plains, is what Jacob Erickson calls "theophanic materiality, in which divine energy is entangled in the performance of indeterminate material agencies" (Erickson 2017, 204).

Nature is thus a theophany, and the ecologically embraced God on terrestrial Earth is "a material being" (Bradshaw 2013, 11–10) incarnated in the geomorphology of the Earth and the bodies of humans and nonhumans.

The ecogeological turn of Christian appreciation of the Earth demonstrates the terrestrial embodiment of divinity in humanity, animality, and vegetality. The omnipresence of God's transcendence is also witnessed and understood horizontally, in the geological depth, the ecological interconnection, and the coexistence of all lives. Given the temporal order of God's creation of the Earth and its life forms, humanity is one of many life forms born after the emergence of many plants and animals. Humans' God-given dominion over the seas and lands comes with the responsibility of being attentive companions and stewards with the ecological Earth and nonhuman life communities.

4 Ecological Sentience in Buddhism

Unlike Christianity, Buddhism offers a beginningless cosmology of the Earth, referring to a kind of Deep Time in which matter and life perpetually appear and transform throughout the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, each of which takes place as an impermanent state formed by inner and outer conditions. The cosmological periods in Buddhism are often defined by the physical manifestations of different Buddhas in different *kalpa* or cosmic eras. Each *kalpa* is marked by a Buddha whose teachings engage with each age's unique material worlds and conditions, its life forms, and the common psychic states of its sentient beings. The current *kalpa* is the cosmic time of Buddha Shakyamuni's teachings and the next *kalpa* is prophesied as that of the future Buddha Maitreya. Although the Earth is not given an origin story in Buddhism, it nevertheless holds a cosmic place in the current universe whose center is known as Mt. Sumeru. The mythology of Mt. Sumeru is commonly shared by Jains, Buddhists, and Hindus; however, it offers different cosmic and geographical meanings for members of the three religions. For instance, in Hinduism, Mt. Sumeru, approximately located in the current Pamir Mountains, is more understood as the center of the Earth rather than of the universe, whereas in Buddhism, it is believed to be the center of the current universe. Thus, to Buddhists, the Earth is known as Jambudvipa and is cosmically located south of Mt. Sumeru, a mythologically understood center of the universe. The Earth is a realm where humans find ways to attain Buddhahood or the state of enlightenment. Early Buddhists likely amplified the Hindu Earth-centered geography to the cosmic level due to the historical Buddha Shakyamuni's residence and

attainment of enlightenment in ancient India, a region located to the south of the Pamir and Himalayan mountain ranges.

Situating Jambudvipa, or the Earth, in the greater universe, the Buddha's teachings parse sentient existence into *sadgati*: the Six Realms – the realms of hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, demigods, and gods. The first three realms are called "the Three Malevolent Paths" while the remaining three are "the Three Benevolent Paths." Among the beings in these six realms, only humans are immediately eligible (in their current incarnation) for enlightenment, although the Buddha's teachings emphasize that all sentient beings inherently and equally possess an identical Buddha Nature (*tathagatagarbha*) or seed of enlightenment (*The Lankavatara Sutra* 119, CBETA 2022). This order of life shows the concurrence of spiritual equality and moral differentiation among sentient beings. Humankind is apparently spiritually more privileged than other species; being a human is the prerequisite of becoming a Buddha.

The notions of sentience and Buddha Nature are immediately relevant to my discussion of how ecology and spirituality are interwoven together in Buddhism. Sentience, as a Buddhist doctrinal concept, refers not merely to living beings' ability to sense and feel in their natural states of being in given ecological habitats, but also entails their divergent moral conditions and uneven spiritual capacities. Regardless of the doctrinal nuances, sentience is fundamentally the biological and intellectual condition for the presence of Buddha Nature in a given living being. Being sentient and having Buddha Nature are two concurrently innate qualities of all living beings.

In the Buddha's teaching, the metaphoric coupling of lotus flowers and silt illustrates the dichotomous and yet symbiotic relationship between Buddha Nature and sentience. The former, as the seed of enlightenment, can only grow from the latter as its soil, though the latter is often morally associated with the notion of *samsara*, the unenlightened realm of suffering. Thus, firmly grounded in the belief of the universal seed of enlightenment in every sentient being, becoming a Buddha starts from one's bio-ecological experience, intellectual understanding, and spiritual willingness to end suffering in the sentient world. Similar to the orthodox image of God as being otherworldly, Buddhist enlightenment is often looked upon as the "other shore," a metaphor that implies that the unenlightened realm is "this shore," a sentient, physical, affectively felt world where one is trapped by one's own greed, jealousy, and ignorance – the three fundamental causes of unenlightenment.

In both remote and recent Buddhist history, this orthodox, bifurcated vision of the enlightenment process was contested, particularly in Tibetan tantric traditions, Zen/Ch'an traditions in China, Japan, and Korea, and in the modern

humanistic Buddhism initiated by Dharma Master Xuyun (1840–1959) and spread to other parts of Asia in the twentieth century (McMahan 2008, 75; Sodargye and Dan Smyer Yü 2017, 105). Contemporary Buddhist environmentalisms in Asia and around the world find roots in these historical trends of recognizing the earthly world as an entwinement of *samsara* and the actual or potential enlightened state. They laid the philosophical and spiritual grounds for Buddhist ecological understandings of the Earth as a complex system of interdependence resting upon the common sentience and the omnipresence of Buddha Nature in all sentient beings. Both are rooted in the ecological worlds of the Earth.

Unlike the Christian sense of the sacred Earth as a divine gift, the sacredness of the Earth from the Buddhist perspective is centered on Buddha Nature in all sentient manifestations, rather than directly on the physical Earth as a sacred entity. It is thus essential to revisit the perennial questions:

– How are sentience and Buddha Nature intertwined in Buddhism?
– What are the ecological implications of being sentient and having Buddha Nature?

In *The Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha describes the different forms of sentient life to his disciple Subhuti:

> I must cause all living beings – those born from eggs, born from wombs, born from moisture, born by transformation; those with form, those without form, those with thought, those without thought, those not totally with thought, and those not totally without thought – to enter nirvana unconditionally and be taken across to the Other Shore". (Heng Kuan et al. 1974, 77)

This style of describing who the sentient beings are is common throughout the Buddhist canon. It is succinctly encompassing and yet remains abstract enough to invite commentaries and interpretations since the time of Buddha Shakyamuni. To return Buddha's abstraction to the concrete world, sentient life includes mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, and insects as well as bodiless supernatural beings, ghosts, spirits, and deities. Thus, Buddha's teachings on sentience are abstracted from the lively ecological worlds of the Earth, but give it moral meanings and spiritual orientation toward enlightenment. Situated in the doctrine of Buddha Nature, the Buddhist idea of sentience thus simultaneously means a bio-ecological existence, this-worldly physical and psychological suffering, and a potential spiritual state of being free from suffering.

It is precisely from the Buddha's teachings on the mutual embodiment of sentience and Buddha Nature that contemporary Buddhist environmental thinkers, such as Thich Nhat Hanh, Joanna Macy, and Stephanie Kaza, innovated the concept known as "interbeing" to underscore the interdependent existence of all lives:

> We are a human being, yes, but at the same time we are everything. Seeing this, we know that to preserve other species is to preserve ourselves. This is interbeing, the deepest teaching of deep ecology. (Nhat Hanh 2021, 43)

The environmental vision of interbeing thus highlights the web of integrated and interdependent life: "Unity is diversity, and diversity is unity. This is the principle of interbeing" (Kaza and Kraft 2000, 85). The mode of interbeing allows us to experience the empathetic understanding of "the interdependently co-arising nature of things" (Macy 2007, 30–35). The diversity of the Earth's lifeworlds embodies not only sentience as the universally innate quality of all living beings but also the seed of enlightenment as the spiritually cherished sacred state of being free from ignorance and pain. Although the Buddhist sense of interdependence is grounded in the intrareligious doctrine of sentience and Buddha Nature, its ecological implications are nevertheless no different from those of Christianity and other religious traditions. This ecological convergence of Buddhism and Christianity is inevitable because of the simple fact that the Earth, preceding both human religions, is the original womb of humans and nonhumans as well as the ground of humans' relational awareness of all existences.

5 Deep Freedom of the Sacred and Sentient Earth

Buddhist ecology and Christian ecotheologies of the Earth and its life communities show the precedence of the physical Earth, with or without a beginning, as the ecogeological foundation in existence before the emergence of all sentient beings. In their own theological and cosmological terms, both religions, in fact, manifest a sense of Deep Time, a scientific perspective positing the Earth as a 4.5-billion-year-old planet. Conceived by the Scottish geologist James Hutton two hundred and thirty years ago, the idea of Deep Time tells a story of the Earth with "no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end" (Hutton in Rudwick 2008, 384). The age of the Earth in many human religious mythologies is as old as or older than the scientifically conceived Deep Time. Hutton's

beginningless Deep Time and the Buddhist sense of the ever-transforming universe without a fixed beginning very much resonate with each other and are thus mutually intelligible. Likewise, the preexisting elemental material components of the Earth before the emergence of life – land, air, and water – in Big History and the Christian creation story are likewise congruent in spite of their different timescales. It is not surprising that open-minded Big Historians like David Christian would call the scientific origin story of the universe "a modern creation myth" (Christian 2011, 3). Likewise, Cynthia Stokes Brown (2020) feels compelled to bring religion into her Big History writing.

Though faith-based ecogeological knowledge of the Earth's history and the notion of Deep Time are mutually communicable, what needs to be pointed out is that, while appreciating religious cosmologies, Big Historians insist that the modern creation myth "must start with modern knowledge and modern questions because it is designed for people who live in the modern world" (Christian 2011, 11). Herein, the modernness refers to modern sciences; therefore, "Big history is a scientific origin story" and "is by definition methodologically materialistic or naturalistic," such that supernatural elements are excluded (Brown 2020, 251–253). This suggests that modern science and religion manifest a zone of artificial mutual exclusion. In my understanding, the scientific frontier of Deep Time studies, in fact, unavoidably encounters the question of the entanglement of the supernatural and the natural. Deep Time compels both scientific and religious humans' natural cognitive ability to imagine how the supernatural cosmos, larger than the solar system and the Milky Way galaxy, was conceived and how it gave birth to the Earth (Swimme and Tucker 2011).

Deep Time is the inevitable common ground on which earth scientists, ecotheologians, religious ecologists, ecospiritualists, and the public are coming together to re-witness the union of the supernatural and the natural, the material and the spiritual, and humanity and divinity. Since Lovelock and Margulis metaphorized the Earth as Gaia, as a planetary being, the increasing number of religious ecologists and environmental scientists have not only shifted from the human-centered ecological view toward the Earth-centered, relational understanding of life, but have also made their religion- or discipline-specific findings conversant and intelligible with each other. Seen from both religious and scientific perspectives, Deep Time unites religions, the sciences, and the public to re-embrace the Earth not merely as a human (-centered) Earth or a historically shallow Earth contemporaneous with humankind over the last two hundred thousand years, but also as a cosmically ancient planet with unimaginable historical depth and a life of her own.

The deepness of the Earth's history, understood from either religious or scientific perspectives, allows us to see the Earth's own indigeneity to the universe conceived thirteen billion years ago according to modern cosmologists. As an embodiment of Deep Time, the 4.5-billion-year-old indigenous Earth obliges us to recognize her innate planetary freedom (Smyer Yü 2021, 239–260), preexisting and eventually outliving humankind, as the basis of the moral and ethical considerability of the Earth in our current environmental discourse. This innate freedom can be called "Deep Freedom" in the sense of Deep Time that is understood spiritually and/or scientifically. It affords us diverse mythical, cosmological, and historical understandings of nature – as a synonym for the Earth, as a prehuman life-supporting surface of the Earth, and as a planetary bio-ecological sphere currently dominated by humankind. If we understand freedom as the state of absence of subjugation and domination, Deep Freedom is the Earth's inherent creative power, right, and agency to sustain her own mode of being and to respond rightfully to human-imposed hindrances, frustrations, and degradations. In the Anthropocene, there are numerous examples of the overwhelming geological power of the Earth's Deep Freedom: floods, droughts, earthquakes, and climate change are the common means, expressions, and statements of the Earth when she interacts with human-induced environmental and geological changes. She has her own terms to exert in order to restore and sustain her innate freedom. This Deep Freedom is the freedom to nourish life as well as to take life, to reshape local and regional geology and ecology, and to rebalance and sustain the course of her cosmic journey (Swimme and Tucker 2011).

If we bracket the effects industrial humans have had on the Earth, for example, dams, tunnels, oil wells, and mines, the Earth's Deep Freedom manifests itself as a planetary state of natural commoning – it is the Earth's own way of distributing environmental flows, climate patterns, and ecological resources over the uneven terrestrial habitats and oceanic worlds on her surface (Smyer Yü 2021, 239–260). The scientifically discerned self-regulating nature and the religiously/spiritually recognized animate nature of the Earth both point to her livingness as the ultimate commons of all living beings. This planetary commons is often viewed in a utilitarian way by nations, corporations, and intergovernmental organizations as merely common (or contested) resources. Modern human efforts to extract the Earth's resources are committed without awareness of the Earth's own innate environmental freedom and commoning process. Forests are felled for the expansion of agricultural land; rivers are dammed for hydraulic power; mountains and hills are flattened to retrieve metals and minerals; industrial drill bits penetrate deep into the bowels of the

Earth for oil and gas; wild animal habitats are shrunken and fragmented; species extinction becomes commonplace; and the Earth's innate environmental freedom and geophysiological self-regulating systems are being subjected to the unprecedented anthropogenic forces of change.

While Big History enlightens the public about the unimaginable ancientness of the physical Earth, with its materialist approach to sketching out the Earth's history in the universe, it has not yet addressed the affective relations of the Earth with humans and nonhuman beings. The genre of its storytelling starts with the physical inception and formation of the Earth and shifts to the emergence of humankind as the dominant species. In many ways, nearly half of the Big Histories written by Christian (2008, 2011, 2018) and Brown (2007) are concerned with human-centered world histories, impressing upon readers that the Earth was ultimately conceived for humans only. Of course, it is undeniable that humankind is the currently dominant species on Earth; however, our two-hundred-thousand-year species history, situated in Big History, ought to remind us that the majority of nonhuman species made their homes on Earth many millions of years before the arrival of humans. Many of them have deeply entered the religious, cultural, symbolic, linguistic, and artistic consciousness of the human worlds. Modern dichotomies of nature and culture, animality and humanity, and materiality and spirituality are being increasingly challenged in the Anthropocene.

With eighty percent of the total human population engaging in religious practices, traditions such as Christianity and Buddhism rightfully have a say in modern human endeavors to reconstruct the more-than-human Deep Time and Deep Freedom of the Earth and its human and nonhuman residents. In recent years, a growing number of Big Historians have advocated Edward O. Wilson's idea of "consilience" (Wilson 1998, 13) aiming at building an alliance of natural sciences with the social sciences and humanities for the sake of "a unified understanding" of a diversely understood reality (Benjamin et al. 2020, 7; Christian 2020, 16). Under the currently accelerating public concerns of climate change and environmental health, this consilient intent can be made expansive enough to include voices from diverse religious constituencies and publicly engaged scholars of religious studies. Both local and global religions worldwide have long histories and rich traditions that address freedom and its associated concepts and ideals such as liberation, salvation, soteriology, enlightenment, and transcendence concerning life and its meanings on Earth. The Deep-Time-inspired Deep Freedom of the Earth awaits scholars of religious studies and the religious public to offer affective, spiritual, and theological understandings of the Earth's innate freedom and its implications in innovating new environmental ethics and policies for restoring and sustaining the health of the Earth.

6 Proposing a Public Theology of the Anthropocene

While Darwin's evolutionary theory profoundly changed human cosmological and biological worldviews, some of its inadvertent public impacts, such as social Darwinism and the feud between evolutionists and creationists, tragically condoned systemic racism in Europe and Neo-Europes (Crosby 2004), and justified state violence enacted on religious institutions and individual believers in nearly half of the world in countries such as the former Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. In contrast, the Anthropocene hypothesis offers a bigger evolutionary picture of the Earth's geological and climatic cycles but is observably uniting science, religion, and the public on the grounds of human collective concern for the effects of environmental degradation and of care for the fate of the Earth. Reverberating through natural and social sciences, humanities, and public environmental debates, the Anthropocene shows the world the collective crisis of climate change that compels collaborative research, collective debates, and more-than-human wisdom for the sake of sustainable living on a sustainable planet. Faith-based knowledge of the Earth is actively playing a role in addressing the maternal principle and ecospirituality of the Earth (Berry 2009; Grim and Tucker 2014; Rose 1996; Sponsel 2012) and climate justice (DeLoughrey et al. 2015; Bonneuil and Fressoz 2017; de la Cadena and Blaser 2018). The interdisciplinary field of religion and ecology is increasingly being diversified with fresh approaches to the interconnectedness of the Anthropocene, religious conceptions of the physical Earth, and the union of matter and spirit (van Dooren and Chrulew 2022; Northcott 2023; Smyer Yü and Wouters 2023).

In this context, I propose a public theology of the Anthropocene with the intent stated earlier and based on a comparative case of the Christian and Buddhist environmentalisms discussed thus far. The rationale for my proposal is that the Anthropocene is not merely an intra-scientific matter but is a public concern across the world. It may remain a debated hypothesis among earth scientists; however, the Anthropocenic appearance of the Earth, in terms of human-induced climate change and unsustainable use of natural resources, is widely witnessed across the world. Given the large number of religious persons in the world, more inclusive, diversified, and publicly engaged research and discourses are in high demand. Scholars in the fields of religious studies are compelled to recognize and weave the diverse knowledge of the Earth from different religious traditions into the consilience of science, religion, and public awareness (Deane-Drummond et al. 2018).

Admittedly, public theology originates from and is nearly exclusively practiced by Christian theologians and scholars; however, it successfully demonstrates its ability to connect Christian theology, the academic world, and the

public (Kim and Day 2017; Patrick 2020; Pirner et al. 2018). This liberal aspect of Christianity was recognized by Harris three decades ago when he offered his critical perspectives on Buddhist environmentalism. The Dalai Lama (1999, 2017, 2021; Dutton and Goleman 2018) and the late Thich Nhat Hanh (1995, 2013, 2021) are widely recognized for their interfaith public outreach environed in the social ethos of Christian public theology. Public theology from Christian scholars indisputably shows a greater potential to inspire other religious traditions to engage with similar public outreach efforts grounded in those traditions' own theological worldviews or exercised with interfaith approaches. As a social scientist and a scholar of religious studies, I am among those who are adopting Christian public theological approaches to the environmental discourse but situate such approaches in terms of interfaith, scientific, and public engagements with the deep history of the physical Earth and its felt life-essence.

Looking at the potentially mutual and complementary facets of Christian and Buddhist environmental thoughts and conservation endeavors from the perspective of the UN Faith for Earth Initiative, I regard the expanding Anthropocene discourse among the world's religious constituencies as what many Christian theologians call the "public square," where one finds the intersection, interaction, and intertwinement of religious and secular voices and actions (D'Costa 2005; Rivera 2018). The faith-based public squares of the Anthropocene are numerous; however, the resulting common questions and debates are centered on the collective suffering of humans and nonhumans under the destructive anthropogenic forces, on renewed queries on the union of matter and spirit, and on the transcendence of divinity in the terrestrial worlds of the Earth. Given the religious diversity of human worlds, the theology I propose is neither a Christian theology nor a Buddhology; rather, I wish to highlight the environmental value of the Christian sense of the physical Earth as a sacred creation and the Buddhist notion of sentience as the inner essence of all living beings. When the sacredness and sentience of the Earth are woven together into the greater public environmental discourse, they show a clearer picture of the Earth's biography – as a life of her own – and of multispecies relations since the inception of life on Earth. In the same but expanded vein, as David Christian calls Big History a modern creation myth, this proposed public theology could act as a new pantheism, involving both religious and scientific understandings of matter as the prerequisite for the creation of the physical Earth and its life communities. In other words, Big History, as a modern creation myth, and culturally specific traditional origin stories are panhuman responses to and imaginations of how supernatural forces (in the images of gods, goddesses, spirits, and the cosmically shapeshifting universal energy) make the Earth alive and give breath to all living beings.

Inspired by earlier ecotheological thinkers like L.H. Bailey and Pierre Teilhard de Chadin, the pantheistic aspect of this public theology reaffirms the genesis of the Earth and life as an everyday event (Bailey 1916, 11) and suggests that "matter will always remain young, exuberant, sparkling, new-born" and as "the matrix of spirit" (de Chadin 1961, 61, 67). The creative divinity or the primal universe-making force remains present and original throughout the past, present, and the future. It endows humankind with a deep sense of physical and affective unity with the Earth as a whole and nudges us "to become one with the world which envelops us without our ever being able to distinguish either its face or its heart" (de Chadin 1974, 58). Deep Time, whether in scientific or religious imaginations, is pulsating through the geology of the Earth as well as in each and every human and nonhuman being. In other words, whether understood as God or as the universal energy in Big History, the primal creative force giving birth to the Earth has been omnipresent throughout its evolutionary journey. It continues to play with land, water, and air and works tectonically to make oceans, split landmasses into continents, and rejoin them on the geological scale. Through a combination of modern cosmology and earth sciences, this new pantheistic theological vision of the Earth affords us an understanding of the sacredness of the Earth – not as an otherworldly property, but rather as an inherent part of the this-worldliness of the Earth and its multispecies residents.

The this-worldliness of divinity or the primal creative force affords us a horizontal transcendence of diverse life forms. In this respect, the idea of sentience from Buddhism, Hinduism, and animism lends strength to the recognition of the fundamental kindredness of humans, animals, and plants. When the identical essence of life is cherished, species' formal differences and humans' moral prejudice against nonhuman beings can be horizontally transcended. Divinity, in this horizontal sense, makes possible the ontological union of this-worldliness and otherworldliness that affords us the recognition of the sacredness of the Earth in sentient terms and of its planetary sentience as sacred. Situated in the global environmental discourse, the concurrent sacred and sentient attributes of the Earth are not intended to reinforce the religious beliefs of Christianity, Buddhism, or animism, but are steered toward the moral considerability of the Earth with an intrinsic value of her own advocated not only by faith-based environmentalists but also by a growing number of scientists and scholars. The basic criterion of moral considerability is the sentience of a given life (Callicott 2013, 35). If we understand sentience as the ability to sense, feel, and communicate, the Earth may not be sentient at all. However, when we recognize the ability of the Earth as a living, self-regulating planetary system to give life, take life, and transform life (Lovelock 1995; Margulis 1998), we are actually given intellectual room to imagine the sentience and innate

freedom of the Earth on a different scale and in a different capacity. Andean and Himalayan indigenous peoples' animistic acceptance of mountains and large water bodies as sentient spiritual beings shows us the precedence of the sentient Earth and its animated landforms (Paerregaard 2021; Smyer Yü 2020b). Among environmental ethicists, Aldo Leopold (1960), Kenneth Goodpaster (1978), and J. Baird Callicott (2013) already opened new ground for morally considering the sentience of the Earth. However, there is still a long way to go before we humans can overcome our anthropocentric conception and anthropogenic treatment of the Earth as a depository of common pool resources only awaiting extraction. This is where this public theology of the Anthropocene is expected to join forces with other faith-based environmental movements in global and regional public squares so as to re-ground our environmental ethics in the livingness of the Earth.

With these basics explained, the public theology of the Anthropocene proposed in this article is conceptualized as an interfaith theology of the living Earth that is recognized as a more-than-human planet under human-induced geological, ecological, and environmental stresses. With the inclusion of nonhuman species and physical environments, this public theology is also a more-than-human theology to be constructed both as an instrument of critiquing the environmentally destructive behaviors of modern humans and as an actionable intention to revive, re-cherish, and relive the knowledge and the ethical principles of humans' co-stewardship of the Earth with nonhuman species as found in accounts of world religions and local belief systems. This public theology serves the public as a conduit of the diverse ecogeological meanings of divinity and the sacred meanings of the ecological Earth. Its theological imaginations and social engagements rest upon an interfaith, interdisciplinary translation of ethnolinguistically conditioned but globally invaluable local environmental knowledge into a publicly communicable language available to a global interfaith audience, religious specialists, academics, and policymakers. It celebrates biodiversity and human diversity as the wonders of the divine creative power and as the biography of the sentient Earth remembered in diverse human creation stories and imagined scientifically in Big History and Deep Time.

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Jewish Environmentalism in the United States: Achievements, Characteristics, and Challenges

Research Article

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Abstract

Concern for the environment is recognizably present in contemporary Judaism, especially in the United States. Along with practitioners of other world religions, Jews have responded to the eco-crisis by reinterpreting canonic texts, articulating eco-theologies, and reenvisioning traditional Jewish rituals. Today there are Jewish environmental organizations and Jewish thinkers who inspire Jews to appreciate the agricultural roots of Judaism, cultivate an environmentally concerned lifestyle, green the practices of Jewish institutions, and advocate the ethics of creation care. Together these activities constitute a Jewish environmental sensibility that allows us to generalize about "Jewish environmentalism," although it falls short of constituting a cohesive "environmental movement." Focusing exclusively on Jewish environmentalism in the U.S., this essay features the academic discourse on Judaism and ecology, the official resolutions of Jewish denominations about environmental matters, and the main activities of Jewish environmental organizations. Judaism is a highly variegated religious tradition that speaks in many voices. Nonetheless, there are shared canonic texts, foundational beliefs, ethical values, and literary tropes that characterize a distinctive Judaic perspective. From that vantage point, development of the physical world is religiously permissible, but it must cohere with the ethical values and legal principles of Judaism. It is not surprising, therefore, that socially progressive Jewish environmentalists have been vocal critics of the extraction industries, transnational capitalism, and wasteful consumerism that have greatly contributed to the eco-crisis. Highlighting the biblical commandment to pursue justice (*tzedek*), some Jewish environmentalists have applied social justice to ecological matters and promoted the ideal of *tikkun olam*

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("repair of the world"). The essay surveys the achievements of Jewish environmentalism and notes persistent challenges.

Keywords

Bal tashchit ("do not destroy") – Creation; Eco-kashrut; Shemitah (sabbatical year) – Torah; Tikkun olam ("repair of the world") – religious environmentalism – religion and ecology

1 Judaism and the Field of Religion and Ecology

Humanity is facing a severe climate crisis, which, as Amitav Ghosh put it, "is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (Ghosh 2017, 9). The crisis is manifested in global warming, climate change, extreme weather events, persistent droughts, devasting wildfires, desertification, deforestation, loss of biodiversity and habitats, rising sea levels, depletion of food sources, pollution of air, water, and soil, and other phenomena of environmental degradation. Across the world, religious practitioners have not remained indifferent to the crisis. In the 1970s, theologians and religious ethicists began to address the ecological crisis by examining their own canonic texts, beliefs, and rituals and exploring how they have contributed to the crisis and how their religion could be practiced differently to minimize ecological devastation. As members of faith communities worldwide examined, critiqued, and reinterpreted the relationship between humanity and nature, they first gave rise to the academic discourse of "religion and ecology" (also referred to as "religion and environment," "religion, nature, and culture," or "religion and nature") (Taylor 2005; R. Gottlieb 2006; Jenkins and Chapelle 2011; Bauman, O'Brien, and Bohannon 2017 [2010]; Kearns 2013; Jenkins, Tucker, and Grim 2016; Hart 2017). In the early 1990s, faith-based groups took up the cause of environmentalism, combining an issue-based approach, which focuses on scientific and technical solutions to environmental issues, with an ethics-based approach that "knitted ecological values and action together" (Smith and Pulver 2009, 149; R. Gottlieb 2010; Ellingson, Woodley, and Paik 2012; Ellingson 2016; Kneale and Kearns 2018). Religious environmentalism thus consists of writing about environmental matters from a religious perspective and acting on behalf of the environment by appealing to religious beliefs, values, or norms. While the academic discourse and environmental religious activism are distinct, they are also closely linked: academics articulate the theoretical justification for environmental activism, and conversely, environmental activists translate theories into practice.

Jews have actively contributed to the emergence of faith-based environmentalism in the United States from its inception in the 1970s. Focusing on Jewish environmentalism in the U.S. to the exclusion of environmentalism in Israel,[1] this paper begins by noting the inherent ambiguity of the phrase "Jewish environmentalism." The ambiguity arises from processes of secularization that problematized the meaning of "Judaism" in the modern period. Whether Judaism is a religion, a people, a nationality, an ethnicity, a culture, or some mixture of all these categories has been hotly debated, rendering modern Jewish existence highly diversified and fractured. If so, who is a "Jewish environmentalist" or what makes one a "Jewish environmentalist" is not a simple question. Indeed, there are many secular Jews who were or are environmentally active but who do not ground their environmental commitments in the sources of Judaism. For example, already in the 1950s and 1960s several secular Jews – Barry Commoner (d. 2012), Murray Bookchin d.2006, and Paul R. Ehrlich (b. 1932) – were responsible for raising public awareness about the forthcoming environmental crisis. Immediately after WWII, Commoner, who was alarmed by the power of atomic energy to destroy the world, started the massive campaign for citizen involvement in decision-making about the use of nuclear power (Egan 2014) and popularized the science of ecology in the pithy "Four Laws of Ecology" (Commoner 1970). Bookchin was also involved in the campaign against nuclear testing, but he addressed other ecological issues. Writing first under the pseudonym "Lewis Herber," Bookchin was the first to warn about the pending ecological crisis due to pollution and the use of chemical additives in foods (Bookchin [pseud. Herber] 1962) a few months before Rachel Carson published her influential book, *Silent Spring*. For the rest of his life, Bookchin articulated social ecology, a distinct variant of environmental philosophy that integrated ecological science, social justice, communalism, and municipal democracy (Light 1998; Biehl 2015). In the late 1960s the Jewish biologist Paul R. Ehrlich (b. 1932) made his dire warnings about the danger of overpopulation and advocated birth control to address the danger of population explosion (Ehrlich 1968; 1991). Although they disagreed in their analyses, these influential environmentalists greatly contributed to the growing public awareness about the eco-crisis. Secular Jewish environmentalists, and there are scores of them, belong in the history of Jewish environmentalism, but this essay focuses on Jewish environmentalists who ground their thought and activism in the literary sources and practices of the Jewish religious tradition.

Jewish religious environmentalism emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s in response to the short essay of Lynn White Jr. that blamed the environmental

1 Jewish environmentalism in Israel requires a separate study which I undertake in my forthcoming book, *Jewish Environmental Spirituality in the Post-Secular Age* (Routledge).

crisis on the "Judeo-Christian tradition" (White 1967). The Bible, so White charged, commanded humanity to "rule and master the Earth" (Gen. 1:28) and biblical anthropocentrism generated the exploitative attitudes that caused the damage humans have inflicted on the natural world. White's essay generated a spirited debate as Christian and Jewish scholars and theologians rose to defend the Bible, reading it anew through the lens of the environmental crisis (e.g., Fretheim 1987; Granberg-Michaelson 1987; Cooper 1990; McDonagh 1990; Rasmussen and Birch 1988; Rasmussen 1996; Northcott 1996; Hiebert 1996; Habel 2000; 2000–02; 2009; Berry 2000; Bouma-Prediger 2001; Conradie 2004; Deane-Drummond 2004; Bauckham 2010; Horrell 2014). Despite the ongoing debate about White's thesis (LeVasseur and Peterson 2017), his critique indisputably stimulated the rise of religious environmentalism among Christians and Jews and later among other faiths.

The initial Jewish response to White's charges was apologetic, exonerating the Bible from responsibility for the eco-crisis. The Jewish respondents to Lynn White argued that he presented a very skewed interpretation of the Bible (Lamm 1972; Helfand 1972; 1983; 1986). White, so they claimed, only focused on the biblical narrative of creation in Genesis 1 to the exclusion of the rest of the Bible, and even in the Book of Genesis, White referred only to 1:28, disregarding the second biblical creation narrative that makes clear that humanity had an obligation "to till and protect" the Earth (Genesis 2:15). The Bible, therefore, does not authorize exploitation of the Earth but rather promotes caring stewardship of the created world. Jewish scholars also faulted White for disregarding the fact that in Judaism the Bible should be read through the prism of postbiblical hermeneutics of the rabbinic tradition which has evolved and continues to evolve to the present. And finally, instead of generalizing about "the Judeo-Christian tradition," Jewish scholars insisted that the Hebrew Bible should be understood on its own unique terms, since Christian readings of the Bible employed Greek philosophical categories which greatly changed the meaning of the biblical text (J. Cohen 1992). Properly understood, the Hebrew Bible harbors deep ecological wisdom that could support sound environmental policies and practices (Ehrenfeld and Bentley 1985 [2001]; J. Cohen 1990; Artson 1991–92 [2001]; Swartz 1995; Benstein 2006). The examination of sources of Judaism through the lens of environmentalism gave rise to Jewish religious environmentalism both as an intellectual discourse and a social movement. Importantly, rabbis and Judaica scholars have led or inspired Jewish environmentalism in the U.S.[2]

2 For example, in California in 1995 a group of rabbis calling themselves "Redwood Rabbis" organized to protect all redwood forests in Humboldt County, California. Their mission was "to carry out the Judaic imperative, laid out in the Book of Genesis, to guard the earth." Active

A major catalyst to Jewish environmentalism as an academic discourse was the conference "Judaism and the Natural World," held in 1997 at Harvard University Divinity School as one of the ten conferences organized by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (1996–98) on Religions of the World and Ecology. The conference's proceedings were published in 2002, featuring key contributors, debates, themes, and texts (Tirosh-Samuelson 2002). A year earlier, another anthology was issued that featured earlier essays by Jewish environmentalists that had been published in academic and semi-academic venues (Yaffe 2001). Since the publication of these seminal works, many more monographs, edited volumes, special issues of journals, and essays were published on Judaism and the environment (Tirosh-Samuelson 2015). As essays on Judaism and the environment were included in reference books and encyclopedias of religion and ecology (Tirosh-Samuelson 2005; 2006; 2016; 2017; Seidenberg 2005a; 2005b), the Jewish voice was integrated into the corresponding academic field. This academic discourse in turn inspired Judaica scholars to reexamine conceptions and representations of nature in rabbinic and post-rabbinic sources (Belser 2015; Wasserman 2017; Shyovitz 2017; Berkowitz 2018; Tirosh-Samuelson 2020), articulate Judaic eco-theology (Seidenberg 2015a), analyze rabbinic jurisprudence about wastefulness (Yoreh 2020; 2021), and reinterpret the Bible and the Passover Haggadah as ecological texts (Neril and Dee 2020; Bernstein 2020). As an academic discourse, Jewish environmentalism bridges the gap between theory and practice: some environmental activists have greatly contributed to the academic discourse and conversely some Jewish academics have been environmental activists. The recently published anthology of essays, *The Sacred Earth: Jewish Perspectives on Our Planet* (Kahn 2023) makes clear that there is indeed a distinctive Judaic perspective on environmentalism and that the discourse has become truly trans-denominational.

2 American Jewry Responds to the Eco-Crisis

Jews in America are a small minority, today numbering about 7.5 million. Because Jews are socially and culturally well integrated in American society, American Judaism is highly fragmented. Many American Jews define themselves in terms of ethnicity, ideology, or culture and manifest their Jewishness through numerous secular venues including theater, film, television, performance art, dance, and literature (Bronner 2008). Religiously affiliated Jews are divided among various "denominations": Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Jewish

between 1995 and 1999, the conservationism of the Redwood Rabbis has exerted lasting impact on Jewish environmentalism in the U.S. (Steinberg 2005).

Renewal, Modern Orthodox, Hasidic, and Ultra-Orthodox, each with its own governing bodies, rabbinical seminary, educational institutions, and distinctive ritual style (Wertheimer 1993; 2018; Heilman 1995; Lezerwitz et al. 1997). The denominations of American Judaism differ in their approaches to Jewish law (Halakhah), ritual observance, attitudes toward modern secularism, relations with the State of Israel, and a range of issues related to women, gender, and sexual orientation. Remarkably, on environmental matters, there is little difference among the various Jewish denominations. Except for Ultra-Orthodoxy, the official bodies of all other strands of American Judaism have been aware of the eco-crisis and have addressed it by appealing to the religious sources of the Jewish traditions.

2.1 *Grassroots Activism*

As Judaica scholars became attentive to environmental issues, grassroot environmental organizations emerged, encouraging Jews to be environmentally active on local, regional, and national levels. At the forefront of the Jewish environmental movement was Ellen Bernstein, who founded Shomrei Adamah (Keepers of the Earth) in 1988, because "she could not find a Jewish institution dedicated to the care of the Earth" (www.ellenbernstein.org). Her pioneering efforts inspired rabbis, scholars, and educators to appreciate the interdependence of Judaism and the environment and agricultural roots of many Jewish rituals (Bernstein and Fink 1992; Bernstein 2000; 2005). Following the lead of this organization, new environmental organizations began to offer environmental programs and initiatives, calling Jews to infuse environmental sensibility into their religious life. In 1993 the Coalition of Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) was established as an umbrella organization of 29 Jewish organizations committed to environmentalism, disseminating Jewish environmental education, and engaging in political advocacy. Two decades later, COEJL would be superseded by another organization – Hazon: Jewish Lab for Sustainability (originally named Hazon: Jewish Inspiration, Sustainable Communities) – either absorbing or enhancing the world of older Jewish environmental organizations. In 2021 Hazon merged with Pearlstone Retreat Center in Maryland that promotes environmental education, and the new organization is now known as Adamah: People, Planet, Purpose. Hazon's new headquarters moved to Pearlstone and Jakir Manela is the CEO of the merged organization. I will say more on Jewish environmental organizations in Part 3 below.

2.2 *Reform Judaism Attends to Environmental Problems*

The leadership of the organized American Jewish community has also become increasingly attentive to the environmental crisis. Reform Judaism, the largest

strand of modern Judaism in America, took the lead in responding to the environmental crisis. Already in November 1965, even before Lynn White Jr. published his influential paper, the Union of Reform Judaism (UJR) noted that "America, in thoughtlessly abusing its natural resources has disregarded the Biblical injunction to conserve God's creation for the good of all" (URJ 1965). In 1969 the General Assembly of the United American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), the congregational arm of Reform Judaism, resolved "to urge that appropriate measures be taken by local, state and national governments to remove or ameliorate the growing threats of environmental pollution and to afford protection to the environment" (URJ 1969). In resolutions on environmental pollution (1969), energy policy (1977; 1979), and the dangers of industrial toxins (1983) the leadership of Reform Judaism recognized the connection between environmental degradation and energy policies and accorded moral standing to the natural environment. In accord with the theology of Reform Judaism, the resolutions made their case for conservation by appealing to the ideal of justice, the ethics of responsibility, and the obligation to save life (*pikuach nefesh*).

Accordingly, in 1977 the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), representing the professional leadership of the movement, issued a resolution that called for "swift development of an effective national energy policy in consonance with the needs of an environment which will nurture life on earth" (CCAR 1977). The resolution specified that "conservation of energy must be the personal responsibility of every American" and urged that "all sacrifices necessary to achieve our goals should be borne equitably by all segments of our society commensurate with their ability to bear such burdens" (ibid.) In 1979 the Union of Reform Judaism adopted a resolution that linked energy policy to "the concern for the protection of human life from hazards that may threaten health or well-being; concern for the environment; concern for future generations and their genetic integrity; and concern for the fair and equitable distribution of energy resources, both among people and countries" (URJ 1979). Aware of global warming, the statement addressed various mitigation practices such as energy audits to reduce energy use, retrofitting structures, or introducing energy-efficient technologies into new structures. In the following decades, Reform Judaism issued numerous resolutions on environmental matters and initiated many programs and projects to implement its environmental commitments. The official "Position of the Reform Movement on the Environment" states that "as heirs to a tradition of stewardship that goes back to Genesis and teaches us to be partners in the ongoing work of Creation, we cannot accept the escalating destruction of our environment and its effect on human health and livelihood. It is our sacred duty to alleviate environmental

degradation and the human suffering it causes instead of despoiling our air, land, and water" (RAC 2023).[3]

2.3 *Ecological Spirituality: The Jewish Renewal Movement*

The Jewish attention to environmentalism must be understood in the context of the cultural upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s: the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and the women's movement. American Jews were deeply involved in these protest movements, often in leadership positions, expressing the Judaic commitment to social justice and their own spiritual yearnings. Some Jews found answers to their spiritual quest in Eastern religious traditions, especially Buddhism, while others found their way back to Orthodox Judaism as part of the *Ba'ale Teshuvah* movement (i.e., returnees to traditional Judaism). One of the most creative responders to the spiritual turmoil of the generation was Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (d. 2014). Associated with the Chabad-Lubavitch branch of Hasidism, Schachter-Shalomi moved away from it in the early 1970s to establish the Jewish Renewal Movement which fused progressive, egalitarian, and democratic values with the spiritual wisdom of the Jewish tradition with inspiration from other spiritual traditions. For Schachter-Shalomi, the eco-crisis was a turning point in cosmic history, one that requires the emergence of Jewish ecological spirituality (Magid 2013). In his unique ecumenical approach, he reinterpreted Jewish theology in a pantheistic manner that celebrates the presence of God in all aspects of creation, thus sacralizing the created world. Schachter-Shalomi's "paradigm shift" inspired the ecological spirituality characteristic of the Jewish Renewal Movement.

Ecological spirituality was translated into environmental activism when Schachter-Shalomi coined the term "eco-kosher" (or "eco-kashrut") in the early 1970s in solidarity with the grape boycott in California led by Cesar Chaves. Arthur Waskow (b. 1933) – a Left-leaning Jewish peace activist and political theorist who found his way back to Jewish religious life and was eventually ordained as a rabbi by Schachter-Shalomi – translated this concept into a full-fledged program of religious environmental activism (Waskow 1995; 1996; 2013). Through the Shalom Center and Aleph: Alliance of Jewish Renewal in Philadelphia, Waskow has propagated Jewish environmental activism that creatively fused elements from Bookchin's social ecology with the spiritual

3 The webpage has links to early URJ environmental resolutions (1965; 1969; 1979; 1983, and 1991), the "Resolution on Climate Change and Energy" (2009), and the "Resolution on Addressing the Impacts of Climate Change" (2017), as well as links to resolutions of the CCAR (1984; 1990; 1992; 1996; 1998; 2001), some of which are cited in this essay.

teachings of Schachter-Shalomi. Social justice cannot be separated from ecological justice, namely, ensuring that the food we consume is produced by just labor practices that treat all workers fairly. Another close associate of Schachter-Shalomi who has contributed to environmentalism is Rabbi Arthur Green, the Judaica scholar and theologian who was the President of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Seminary. Under the label "Neo-Hasidism," Rabbi Green articulated Jewish eco-theology which was inspired by Kabbalah and Hasidism (Green 2002; 2010) and his ideas were later elaborated by his students, Rabbi David Seidenberg, who was also ordained by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (Seidenberg 2015a; 2021), and Rabbi Ariel Mayse (Green and Mayse 2019a; Green and Mayse 2019b). The ecological spirituality of Schachter-Shalomi also inspired another environmental activist, Rabbi Zelig Golden, who founded Wilderness Torah, an organization that promotes the return to Earth-based Judaism, namely, practicing Jewish rituals outdoors and appreciating the spiritual dimensions of nature. Variously interpreted, ecological spirituality became the hallmark of the socially progressive Jewish Renewal Movement and Reconstructing Judaism.

2.4 *Conservative Judaism: Creation Care as a Jewish Religious Obligation*

Reconstructing Judaism, a small denomination that split off from Conservative Judaism in 1968, was previously known as the Reconstructionist Movement. Inspired by the teachings of Mordecai Kaplan (d. 1983), who regarded Judaism as an evolving religious civilization, Reconstructing Judaism presents itself as "deeply rooted and boldly relevant." Namely, the ancient Jewish religious tradition is relevant to contemporary Judaism because it pertains to all aspects of life, and that includes the environment. Reconstructing Judaism has passed many resolutions on environmental issues, including air pollution, the greenhouse effect, acid rain, ozone smog, ozone depletion, water issues, wetland protection, ocean protection, treatment of waste and hazardous materials, wildlife conservation, clean water, and fossil fuels (RJ 2017). Inspired by Martin Buber's dialogical philosophy, the environmentally concerned Reconstructionist rabbis emphasized that "real relationship to God cannot be achieved on earth if real relationship to the world and to mankind [sic] are lacking. Both love of the Creator and love of that which [God] has created are finally one and the same" (Dobb 2001/2002, 12; cf. Dobb 2016). By expressing interconnection with God's creation through acts of loving-kindness, humans can respond to the ecological crisis. Already in the 1970s, Jonathan Wolf, an Orthodox Jewish social activist, first integrated the Kabbalistic practice of Tu Bishvat seder with explicit references to environmental issues. Since then, in various Reconstructionist

congregations, ecological interpretations of Tu Bishvat seder have become quite common. For example, Temple Beth Israel in Eugene, Oregon, formed an Honoring Nature Committee that organized an environmental fair that introduced the ritual of Tu Bishvat seder to members of the congregation.[4] Reconstructionist congregations spread concerns about environmental issues in organized Jewish life by collaborating with COEJL as well as with interfaith environmental organizations such as Interfaith Power and Light and Interfaith Global Warming Initiative. Under the Tikkun Olam Initiative affiliated congregations of the Reconstructionist movement became significantly involved in environmental activism.[5]

No less attentive to the dangers of environmental collapse is Conservative Judaism, which positions itself between Reform Judaism and Modern Orthodoxy. Unlike Reform Judaism, which challenged the authority of rabbinic Judaism and called for the modernization of the Jewish tradition, Conservative Judaism declared its commitment to Jewish law (Halakhah) and responded to the challenges of American life by looking at all aspects of American society and culture through the prism of Jewish canonic texts. And unlike Modern Orthodoxy, Conservative Judaism emphasized the historical development of Judaism through the collective decision-making of the Jewish community. During the 1980s and 1990s, Conservative rabbis trained at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York (JTS) were engaged in anchoring Jewish environmentalism in the literary sources of the Jewish tradition (i.e., the Bible, the Mishnah, the Talmud, the Midrashim, medieval philosophy, Kabbalah, and Hasidism). Conservative rabbis, such as Rabbi Evertt Gendler (d. 2022), an early advocate and practitioner of organic farming and vegetarianism, Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, the Chancellor of JTS (1986–2006), and especially Rabbi Lawrence Troster (d. 2019) (Troster 2004; 2008; 2013), promoted Jewish environmentalism and were involved in the creation of COEJL and in interfaith environmental activism.

During the 1990s the official bodies of the Conservative movement, the Rabbinical Assembly (RA), the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ), and the Committee of Laws and Standards (CLS), issued many

4 Tu Bishvat (the 15th of the month of Shevat) is the considered the New Year for Trees. This postbiblical rabbinic holiday, which testifies to the rabbinic attentiveness to nature, was given new mystical meanings in the 16th century by Kabbalists in the Land of Israel. Contemporary Jewish environmentalists have revived the ritual as part of the effort to "re-earth" Judaism.

5 The commitment to improve the world through human action is central to the Jewish religious tradition, but in the U.S. beginning with the 1950s, the value of *tikkun olam* has become the hallmark of Jewish social activism, including environmentalism (Troster 2008; Rosenthal 2012).

resolutions on environmental matters.[6] In 1991 the Rabbinical Assembly called for growing, producing, and manufacturing food and food products in a way that protects the Earth, using consumables such as paper products, cleaning materials, etc. that are both recycled and recyclable, and investing in companies that practice environmentally friendly practices. The congregations of the Conservative movement were called to recycle and reduce waste in both its institutions and homes of members and constituents, and congregations were encouraged to conduct environmental audits, to integrate Jewish environmental education into the educational curriculum, and to avoid wasting food in Jewish celebrations (1994). Other resolutions pertained to opposition to legislation that would undermine laws that safeguard the environment (1995); protecting the diversity of our species in the environment (1996); calling for legislators to promote global environmental health such as the passing of clean air standards, reducing toxic waste, regulating hazardous materials, and testing of products before they are brought to market for their compliance with environmental regulations (1997; 1999); and the promotion of environmental reforms and global development that would help the citizens of the world live within the bounds of the capacity of the Earth. All these environmental resolutions were justified by appeal to the ethical values of Judaism, especially the pursuit of justice.

2.5 *Eco-Social Justice*

During the 1990s a new theme surfaced in the Jewish environmental discourse: environmental racism. This was no coincidence, since the movement of environmental justice emerged in the early 1980s when it became clear that many landfills, facilities to treat hazardous waste, and incinerators were placed in areas where poor and marginal communities reside. The poor and marginalized communities were unfairly exposed to harms associated with resource extraction, hazardous waste, and other harmful land uses. A large body of interdisciplinary social science literature including theories about environmental justice, environmental laws and policies, sustainability, and political ecology made it clear that environmental issues are intertwined with race, class, and ethnicity (Mohai, Pellow, Roberts 2009). The environmental justice movement was heavily influenced by the civil rights movement (Webb 2001; Schultz 2001), in which many Jews, including Reform and Conservative rabbis, were involved. Thus, the CCAR resolution from 1996 opposed environmental

6 The various resolutions of the Rabbinical Assembly on the environment are available at: https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/tzedek-justice/environment; and https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/tzedek-justice/environment/resolutions.

racism and "the placement of significant and disproportionate environmental risks on the health and safety of impoverished communities and communities of color" (CCAR 1996), a position reiterated in a later resolution (CCAR 2015). The Judaic concern for justice was expressed by linking civil rights and the right to a clean environment.

Eco-social justice is not the exclusive prerogative of liberal/progressive forms of contemporary Judaism. A few Modern Orthodox Jews are also avid environmentalists. Already in 1975 Jonathan Wolf, who was mentioned above, founded the Jewish Vegetarians of North America (JVNA), which changed its name to Jewish Veg in 2015, and in the 1980s the Orthodox mathematics professor Richard H. Schwartz relentlessly promoted vegetarianism as the appropriate Jewish response to the eco-crisis (Schwartz 1982; 1984). Prominent Modern Orthodox rabbis (e.g., the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in the U.K. and Rabbi Irving Greenberg in the U.S.) have been vocal supporters of vegetarianism or veganism and have highlighted the ecological wisdom of the Jewish tradition. In 1988, the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) issued a resolution on energy and attended to the seeming conflict between environmentalism and the language of Genesis 1:28. In 1991, the RCA's statement suggested that humans have only a "limited dominion" over the Earth, which means "stewardship over God's creation, to tend and to protect the world for future generations" (RCA 1991). Although the RCA did not engage environmentalism as rigorously as the other Jewish denominations, in 1999 the RCA issued a resolution on energy policy and in 2006 there was a call to action to reduce oil consumption and American dependence on oil and another resolution on the importance of preserving the environment. Promoting Torah-based environmentalism, Modern Orthodoxy called for climate-change education (2008) and supported the establishment of the environmental organization Canfei Nesharim (http://www.canfeinesharim.org). Founded by Evonne Marzouk, an Orthodox woman who was inspired by Rabbi Arthur Waskow, this organization sought to fuse environmental consciousness to Torah life, primarily through education, and since 2014 primarily through a website portal (Marzouk 2009). Modern Orthodoxy too has environmentally engaged rabbis, most notably Rabbi Shmuli Yanklowitz, who founded the environmental organizations SHAMAYIM: Jewish Animal Advocacy and Uri L'Tzedek: Orthodox Social Justice, which are guided by Torah values in their attempts to combat the suffering and oppression of people, animals, and the environment. The progressive wing of Modern Orthodoxy is committed to Torah-based social justice and environmental activism (e.g., Yanklowitz 2012; 2015). Focusing on the issue of wastefulness, Tanhum Yoreh, an Orthodox scholar who teaches at the School of the Environment of the University of Toronto, has identified the barriers to

halakhically driven environmental decision-making and suggested a pathway to advance Jewish legal discourse that is more aligned with mainstream environmentalism (Yoreh2018; 2020; 2021). Ariel Evan Mayse, an Orthodox scholar of Religious Studies at Stanford University who is aligned with Neo-Hasidism, has written essays on Halakhah as a source for contemporary Jewish environmental ethics (Mayse 2019; Mayse and Weissberg 2022). These examples indicate that environmental awareness does exist among Orthodox Jews in North America.

2.6 *Climate Change: The Face of the Eco-Crisis*

In 1998 climate change became the face of our eco-crisis, after the U.S. government refused to sign the Kyoto Agreement (1997), which sought to generate a treaty with binding commitments to address the threat of climate change. In 1998 the CCAR recognized climate change in terms of religious responsibility to future generations, stating that "minimizing climate change requires us to learn how to live within the ecological limits of the Earth so that we will not compromise the ecological or economic security of those who come after us" (CCAR 1998). Along with responsibility to future generations, the resolution spoke of the "integrity of creation" and the "equitable distribution of responsibility." In no uncertain terms, the resolution demanded that we recognize "our nation's responsibility to reduce global carbon emissions," and urged "institutions within the Jewish community to conduct energy audits of private homes and communal facilities, including synagogues, schools, community centers and commercial buildings" (CCAR 1998). Additional resolutions on climate change were issued by the CCAR in 2000 and 2005, repeating these principles as well as referring to "protection of the vulnerable" and the notion of "sustainable development." Since the Brundtland Report of 1987, "sustainable development" became the organizing principle for meeting human development goals while also sustaining the ability of natural systems to provide the natural resources and ecosystem services on which the economy and society depend. Yet how to translate the goal of sustainability into action has generated spirited debate, since some consider development to be inherently unsustainable while others are disappointed by the lack of progress in what has been achieved to date.

A focus on climate change also characterized the resolutions of the Conservative movement. For example, in 2000 the Rabbinical Assembly of the Conservative movement passed a resolution calling for ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, since nuclear arms that would be used in full-scale nuclear war would negatively impact the environment. In resolutions from 1998, 1999, 2003, and 2013, the Rabbinical Assembly called

upon elected officials to pass legislation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, including financial incentives such as a carbon tax, enforce high regulation standards, regulate harmful chemicals and substances, and aggressively support pollution prevention measures. The Rabbinical Assembly also urged its members to advocate for energy audits for their own institutions and to promote the E.P.A. Energy Standards for all future building projects. Members were encouraged to become educated about the value of recycling, green transportation, options such as public transit and high mileage vehicles, and energy efficiency practices in the home. Taking a stand on climate change was justified in explicit religious terms. Thus, the resolution of the Rabbinic Assembly on energy and the environment (2001) stated that humanity must serve as

> faithful stewards of Creation that are morally compelled to choose safe, clean and sustainable sources of energy which will protect and preserve the world. The gifts of God's creation are to be conserved over time for God's children and by depleting energy sources, and causing global warming, fouling the air with pollution and poisoning the land with radioactive waste, we diminish our children's and our grandchildren's health and well-being (RA 2001).

Going beyond pious statements, Conservative Judaism delineated specific practices to mitigate climate change. In 2007 the Conservative movement recommended energy audits; the purchase of energy from sustainable sources; the reduction of waste through recycling and limiting the use of disposable utensils; the use of non-toxic cleaning, lawn, and garden care products; and educational programs in the community teaching the Jewish sources of environmentalism and encouraging members of the community to green their own home. It also encouraged constituents to reduce energy use by driving high mileage vehicles, using public transportation, and carpooling and to construct buildings that adhere to the highest possible environmental standards (RA 2007). In 2008 the Rabbinical Assembly called on the institutions of the Conservative movement to sign the "Green Covenant: A Jewish Pledge toward Carbon Neutrality" to reduce their carbon footprint and to call on the governments of our countries to reduce carbon emissions by 50% (RA 2008). The Green Covenant promotes a solar Ner Tamid,[7] supports legislation at the local and federal level of CAFE (Corporate Average Fuel Economy) standards,

7 Ner Tamid (literally, Perpetual Light) is a ritual, symbolic object that is positioned above that Ark that contains the Torah scrolls.

and calls for the use of renewable resources and the improvement of public transportation.

An important milestone in the Jewish engagement of environmentalism was the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in 2009. Jewish environmentalists tend to view climate change not just as a scientific issue to which there is a technoscientific solution, but as a moral issue that demands a religious response framed in terms of climate justice. Thus in 2009 the Union of Reform Judaism spoke about "the unprecedented challenge of climate change due to greenhouse gas emissions," stating that "the need for serious and urgent action on this issue has never been clearer" (URJ 2009; cf. CCAR 2005; CCAR 2022). While recommending cap-and-trade and carbon tax as mitigating policies, the CCAR declared climate change as "a fundamentally social justice issue that marries our mandate to be good stewards of the earth with our call to care for the least among us" (URJ 2009). Among the policies that promoted sustainable responses to climate change were protecting tropical forests and other carbon-absorbing ecosystems around the world through the sustainable development of forests and other natural sources; investing in global development and the dissemination of clean energy technologies; and responding to climate change impacts throughout the world with a focus on adaptation efforts in the most vulnerable nations and communities.

If "climate change" became the shorthand of the ecological crisis, "sustainability" became the shorthand for the appropriate responses to climate change. In 2009, the Jewish organization Hazon: Jewish Lab for Sustainability, which has emerged as the leading Jewish environmental organization, launched The Jewish Climate Change Campaign. In its vision statement, "Sustaining Our Vision," the organization helps Jewish environmental activists with practical suggestions "how to green assets and how to take uniquely Jewish action to fight climate change and promote sustainability" (http://www.arcworld.org). The statement expressed the belief that "the Jewish people will offer its wisdom, tradition and thought leadership to help light the way for all." To implement this vision, Hazon initiated a program for Jewish institutions whose successful completion results in the Hazon Seal of Sustainability.

In 2009 COEJL also hosted the first Jewish Sustainability Conference, in recognition that the Jewish environmental movement must enter a new phase due to the urgency of the situation. Initiatives such as the Jewish Energy Covenant Campaign and the Jewish Climate Change Campaign asked American Jews to pledge that they will act to conserve on the individual level, be part of Jewish communal actions on the environment, and advocate for environmental issues with elected officials and in the media. Since 2010 COEJL positioned itself as a clearinghouse of information for synagogues and Jewish organizations,

providing best practices and products to help sustainability, offering advice, and maintaining connections between groups working on similar issues. The Jewish responsibility to live more sustainably to address climate change became the overarching goal of climate activism adopted by many Jewish environmental organizations.

2.7 *Jewish Environmentalism and Interfaith Collaboration*

Jewish religious environmentalism was enhanced by American faith-based environmentalism, to which it contributed. In 2015 Jewish environmentalists welcomed the publication of the papal encyclical *Laudato Si'* and praised the courageous leadership of Pope Francis. The fact that in *Laudato Si'* the Pope referred to the laws of the Sabbatical Year and Jubilee (Leviticus 25), the protection of species (Deuteronomy 22: 6-7), and the Sabbath (Exodus 23:12) as major environmental principles of creation care made clear the shared ground between Judaism and other world religions, especially Christianity, on environmental matters. When Pope Francis visited the U.S. in September 2015, over 200 Jewish rabbis and cantors signed a letter welcoming his commitment to the environment; COEJL issued an official statement, saying: "Pope Francis has blown the shofar to the world in his encyclical *Laudato Si'* and we in Rabbinic leadership have heard the call." And Arthur Green, the influential eco-theologian, stated that *Laudato Si'* "is a clarion call to all people who call themselves religious."[8] In the fight against climate change, large segments of the Jewish community saw Pope Francis as an important ally, and Jewish climate activists joined forces with other interfaith organizations such as GreenFaith, Interfaith Power and Light, and The Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development.

An important milestone in global efforts to address climate change was the UN Convention on Climate Change in Paris in 2015, which reached a landmark agreement to combat climate change and to accelerate and intensify the actions and investments needed for a sustainable low-carbon future. Most of the world's nations, including the United States, joined the Paris Agreement, and not surprisingly in 2015 the CCAR issued a resolution that considered climate change "particularly threatening to poor and vulnerable populations worldwide" (CCAR 2015). The CCAR went on to assert: "Climate Change will further reduce the access to drinking water, negatively affect the health of poor people, and will pose a real threat to food security in many countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America." Regrettably, when the Trump administration came

8 See "Religion and Environmental Responsibility: A Jewish-Catholic Conversation," available at: http://www.nationalcouncilofsynagogues.org.

into power in 2016, the U.S. withdrew from the Paris Accord to the chagrin many people in the world, including at least a portion of American Jewry. In response to the unilateral act, the Reform movement grew critical of the U.S. government and became even more urgent in its pleas to address climate change. In 2017, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism issued a statement that extolled the Jewish value of *pikuach nefesh* (i.e., saving life) as the "ultimate ethical obligation" and criticized the failure of the Trump administration. In the same year, the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) addressed the impact of climate change as evidenced in rising sea levels, extreme weather events, intense storms, and other negative impacts of climate change. All Reform congregations were encouraged "to take steps to educate and prepare themselves and their neighbors for the impact of sea level rise, wildfires, extreme weather events, droughts, and other impacts of climate change and work with local organizations to provide relief to those affected by these events" (URJ 2017). The Reform movement called for legislative, regulative, and judicial action to protect all communities from the damaging impacts of climate change. The resolution encouraged the U.S. to continue to uphold international responsibilities to decrease the human impact of climate change and encouraged Reform congregations to work with interfaith and other partners within their communities to advocate for and work to implement climate change solutions. The Biden administration's return of the U.S. to the Paris Accord has been welcomed by Liberal/Progressive Jewish religious organizations.

2.8 *Climate Change Activism*

The most persistent call to make climate change central to the Jewish social agenda came from Rabbi Arthur Waskow, who was mentioned above. Evoking Tractate Avot 1:14 "If not now, when?," Waskow persuasively claimed that climate change is *the* Jewish issue of our time and appealed to Jews and non-Jews "to reflect upon the impact of climate change on this Holy Temple that is our Planet Earth, to turn and take action, large and small, toward a better future" (Waskow 2014a; Waskow and Laur 2014b). His call to tackle climate change did not go unheeded and new organizations devoted to climate advocacy were founded with women in leadership roles. In 2016 Dr. Mirele B. Goldsmith, a psychologist and environmental educator, co-founded the Jewish Climate Action in New York (and later another chapter in Boston), whose goal is to "mobilize communities to take leadership in bold climate campaigns through education and reducing carbon footprint" (www.jewishclimate.org). In 2018 Goldsmith also founded the Jewish Earth Alliance as a grassroots coalition that seeks "to mobilize Jews to stand up and raise a loud, collective voice for policies that reflect Jewish values" (www.jewishearthalliance.org).

In 2019 Rabbi Jennie Rosenn, a Reform Rabbi and social activist who served as the Director of the Jewish Life and Values Program at the Nathan Cummins Foundation, founded Dayenu: A Jewish Call to Climate Action with the intent "to mobilize Jewish support for climate solutions and to raise up a spiritual, religious, and moral voice in the national and global movements confronting the climate crisis" (www.dayenu.org). The organization's mission is "to secure a just, livable and sustainable world for all people for generations to come by building a multigenerational Jewish movement that confronts the climate crisis with spiritual audacity and bold political actions." To stimulate Jewish climate activism, Hazon has invoked the religious value of *teshuvah* (i.e., repentance) as the right frame of mind that "offers us an opportunity to face our negative actions and create a new path forward" (www.hazon.org). As climate change became an urgent Jewish social issue, it has overshadowed earlier environmental commitments to conservation, preservation, finding God in nature, or appreciating the Earth-based roots of Judaism.

Joining forces against climate change has brought Jewish organizations to collaborate and cooperate. For example, prior to the United Nations Convention in Glasgow, Scotland, (COP 26) an interdenominational group of rabbis issued a prayer for President Biden on the eve of his departure. Composed by Rabbi Daniel Swartz, the current leader of COEJL, who attended an interfaith meeting with Pope Francis prior to COP 26, the prayer stated:

> Through your blessing, may the President lead the world to take the swift, ambitious actions needed to protect this common home, Your Earth, so that future generations inherent a just, sustainable, and bountiful world. May generosity triumph over greed and may all the leaders gathered at COP26 stand in solidarity with the poor and vulnerable.

Among the distinguished participants in this ceremony was Rabbi Arthur Waskow, whose sustained leadership has successfully made environmentalism important to the Jewish communal agenda. Similarly, in Israel, prior to the departure of Prime Minister Naftali Bennett for Glasgow, forty-three Modern Orthodox rabbis wrote a letter to him stating that "reducing climate change must be a central focus of Jewish life today." The Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox establishments in Israel, however, do not promote environmentalism because it is viewed as inherently secular and antithetical to Torah. Jewish religious environmentalism exists in Israel, but it is less impactful than in American Jewry. In a recent survey from 2022 commissioned by the Environmental Protection Ministry, only 19% of Ultra-Orthodox Israelis said they were concerned about

climate change and 29% were not willing to make any lifestyle changes for the sake of the climate. Nonetheless, there are Ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel that implement various measures to curb wasteful consumption and endorse simplicity as a form of voluntary poverty (Yoreh 2018).

The above overview makes clear American Jewry has been attentive to the eco-crisis as early as the mid-1960s, and that American Jews, especially the rabbis among them, have been involved in environmental activism since the early 1990s. A handful of Jewish theologians and Judaic scholars have reexamined the sources of Judaism through the prism of the eco-crisis and articulated Jewish eco-theology, the leadership of the organized Jewish community has issued various environmental practices to mitigate environmental damage, and grassroots environmental organizations encouraged American Jews to become environmentally concerned, educated, and involved on local, regional, and national levels. Today it is less tenable for Jews to cavalierly dismiss Jewish environmentalism by saying that "saving the whales is not a Jewish issue" or by asking "what does Judaism have to do with environmentalism?" Alas, many Orthodox Jews and almost all Ultra-Orthodox Jews continue to voice these views, even though leading Orthodox authorities, including Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (d. 1992), Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (d. 2007), and Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (d. 2020) have reflected deeply on human responsibility for God's created world and on human culpability for the eco-crisis. Concern for the well-being of the environment is shared by diverse strands of contemporary Judaism not only because the eco-crisis is so severe but also because religious Jews endorse creation theology and the ethics of care and responsibility that flow from it. The following section explains this claim.

3 Diversity, Creativity, and Persistent Challenges

Today there are many non-profit Jewish environmental organizations in the U.S., synagogues have initiatives and programs to introduce congregants to environmentalism, and Jewish communal institutions have put in place environmentally friendly practices (e.g., recycling, LEED building codes, energy reduction efforts, etc.). However, to date there is no systematic and comprehensive analysis of Jewish environmentalism as a distinct voice within American Judaism. Determining the numerical strength of Jewish environmentalism remains a desideratum. Since Jewish environmentalism came into its own during the digital revolution of the 1990s, the Internet has played a crucial role in the dissemination of information, networking, and fundraising,

which only complicates the assessment of the actual strength of Jewish environmentalism. A website makes information readily available to many, but it does not accurately convey what transpires in actual activities and does not provide information about the attitudes and commitments of users of the website. Programs of Jewish organizations are offered to non-members who may or may not consider themselves "Jewish environmentalists," and those who participate in these programs may do so regularly, occasionally, or very sporadically. In other words, environmental engagement within the Jewish community varies in frequency and intensity. For some participants, environmentalism is a primary expression of their Jewish identity; for others, interest in environmentalism enriches their Jewish life but not to the exclusion of other commitments; and for still others, environmentalism is but a marginal interest by comparison to other dimensions of their Jewishness. Therefore, it is difficult to generalize about Jewish environmentalism or sketch the socio-religious profile of a presumably typical Jewish environmentalist.

During the 20th century American Jewry created strong communal institutions, and Jewish environmentalism has been impactful because the leadership of the organized Jewish community in the U.S., as shown above, has endorsed the notion that addressing the eco-crisis is a Jewish religious and moral obligation on individual and communal levels. Unfortunately, the very decentralization of American Jewry and its denominational fragmentation have made it difficult for Jewish environmentalism to function as a unified social movement or even to collaborate across denominational divides. Instead of treating Jewish environmentalism as a social movement with a clear institutional structure, it is more appropriate to view Jewish environmentalism as a *sensibility* that manifests itself through numerous organizations that disseminate the environmental outlook in diverse ways but that often compete among themselves for resources and participants. The core of Jewish environmentalism is a small cadre (numbering several hundreds) of environmental activists who lead environmental organizations, impart environmental knowledge, staff the various programs and initiatives, maintain the facilities (e.g., farms, gardens, or hiking trails), and orchestrate public protests and marches to raise environmental awareness. Many more Jews (numbered in thousands and perhaps even over a hundred thousand) take part in programs and activities organized by environmental organizations, albeit with different levels of involvement and commitment. These activities can be classified into four main areas: education; identity formation and community building; advocacy work; and Jewish farming and food movement. A given organization can engage in one, some, or all these activities, and all environmental organizations must engage in networking and outreach to enlarge their membership.

3.1 *Environmental Education*

Most Jewish environmental organizations focus on education, namely, they impart environmental knowledge and explain how Judaism can respond to the eco-crisis. For example, the Pearlstone Retreat Center in Reistertown, Maryland, was founded in 1982 in collaboration with the organized Jewish community of Baltimore (known as the Associated). The organization is committed to "preserve the earth's resources for future generations, thereby enhancing community vibrancy and our quality of life," and to foster "a culture where sustainability and environmental health are integral to Baltimore's Jewish community" (www.pearlstoneretreatcenter.org). The large campus of 180 acres of rolling hills and wooded trails supports a retreat and conference center where people come to study, as well as a farm that provides certified organic produce and farm-to-table food. In this operation one can learn about solar power projects and initiatives, water restoration, green loans, land stewardship, and other green initiatives. As noted above, the Pearlestone Retreat Center has merged with Hazon in 2021 and the headquarters of Hazon moved to Pearlstone. The merger of two leading Jewish environmental organizations does not necessarily indicate a growing institutional strength, but rather the need to consolidate resources in order to survive.

In the 1990s and early 2000s the Teva Learning Center was the leading organization that dispensed environmental education. It was established in 1994 as part of the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center. This retreat center, which was founded already in 1897 as The Jewish Working Girls Vacation Society, offered access to "nature" for working Jewish girls from metropolitan New York. In 1956 the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center moved to the current location in Falls Village, Connecticut, and began to serve older Jewish adults. In the 1990s it became a primary retreat center for many Jewish organizations that hold their retreats on its lush ten-acre campus. The Teva Learning Center was established in 1994, when Jewish environmentalism came into its own, with the mission to renew "the ecological wisdom inherent in Judaism by immersing participants in the natural world" (https://tevalearningcenter.org). Centering on nature preservation and environmental literacy, its programs are directed to children in Jewish day schools, summer camps, and Hebrew schools (i.e., supplementary schools) and the programs reach about 4,000 children per year. The Isabella Jewish Retreat Center also supports other environmental programs – Adamah Fellowship and Adamah Farm – in which participants learn to "integrate organic agriculture, farm-to-table living, Jewish learning and community building, social justice and spiritual practice" (www.hazon.org).

The Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center and the Teva Learning Center were first integrated into Hazon: Jewish Lab for Sustainability, which later

merged with the Pearlstone Retreat Center, and is now named Adamah: People, Planet, Purpose. During the first two decades of the 21st century, Hazon sought to lead "a transformative movement weaving sustainability into the fabric of Jewish life, in order to create a healthier, more sustainable, and more equitable world for all" (www.hazon.org). Positioning itself as an inclusive organization that embodies "diversity in national origin, indigeneity, race and ethnicity, religion and spirituality, gender, sexuality, age, marital status and ability," Hazon is committed to justice and equity. Hazon's programs teach and inspire the practice of environmental sustainability and justice, connect people to nature, "renew Jewish life through earth-based Torah, and teach through hands-on experiential education using the land as our teacher" (www.hazon.org). In integrating education, advocacy, community building, and farming, Hazon encompasses all types of Jewish environmental activism, but the consolidation of several environmental organizations under the leadership of Hazon may not necessarily convey strength. It may also reflect dwindling financial resources within the Jewish community available for environmental education. The funding for Jewish environmental organizations comes mainly from private Jewish philanthropies (e.g., The Jim Joseph Foundation, the Leichtag Foundation, the New Israel Fund, the Blaustein Philanthropic Group, and others). However, grants are usually designated for specific projects and are time limited, which means that one must constantly engage in fundraising. Securing funding remains a persistent challenge and that explains the high turnover among the activists, who move from one organization to another.

A different kind of Jewish environmental education is Aytzim: Ecological Judaism (https://www.aytzim.org) (formerly the Green Zionist Alliance). This New York based organization collaborates with other Zionist, environmental, and interfaith organizations to educate about the nexus of Judaism, environmentalism, and Zionism. The organization promotes several projects – a grassroots campaign for a sustainable Israel, Jewcology: Home of the Jewish Environmental Movement, Jews of the Earth, and Shomrei Breishit: Rabbis and Cantors of the Earth – but it is primarily an educational outfit that hosts resources (e.g., research papers, academic papers, news articles, videos, and books) on its website. However, unlike the previous two organizations, Aytzim is more involved in policy and politics by supporting environmentally committed candidates to the World Zionist Organizations and for the leadership of the Jewish National Fund. Alon Tal, an American environmental Zionist who founded the Green Zionist Alliance, settled in Israel in the late 1980s and emerged as a leading environmental scholar and political activist in Israel and until recently he even served in the Israeli parliament (Tal 2002; 2013; 2016). While Aytzim: Ecological Judaism perpetuates the original Zionist orientation,

most of its current programs focus on environmental education and the dissemination of environmental concern among Jews in North America.

3.2 *Identity Formation and Community Building*

Several organizations have focused on cultivating Jewish environmental spirituality by practicing the rituals of Judaism outdoors and by cultivating ecological spirituality. Commonly revolving around a charismatic leader who is critical of the more conventional ways of practicing Judaism, these organizations seek to transform the Jewish identity of individuals while building new communities. For example, in 1989 Rabbi Howard Cohen, associated with Reconstructionist Judaism, founded Burning Bush Adventures to offer Jewish spiritual experiences in the great outdoors. Today the organization offers outdoor activities, day trips, and overnight camping experiences led by various Reconstructionist rabbis. A similar organization is TorahTrek: The Center for Jewish Wilderness Spirituality, which was founded by the Reform Rabbi Mike Comins in 2001, offering hikes, wilderness retreats, leadership training, and an e-journal as its contribution to the Jewish environmental movement. Featuring articles, audio, and videos on Judaism and the natural world, sustainability, spiritual practice in nature, and lesson plans for educators, the e-journal illustrates how the digital medium of the Internet helped disseminate environmental awareness and activism. Rabbi Comins no longer leads the organization, but the goals of TorahTrek – "exposing Judaism's roots in wilderness, facilitating direct experience of the Divine in nature, demonstrating the effectiveness of Judaism as a spiritual practice, and fostering the spiritual growth of individual Jews and Jewish communities" (www.rabbimikecomins.com) – can be found in yet another organization, Wilderness Torah, that Rabbi Zelig Golden founded in 2007.

Located in Berkeley, California, Wilderness Torah is committed to inclusive membership, and welcomes everyone to its events: "Jews, people with other faiths and backgrounds, interfaith couples and families, the LGBTQIA community, [and] people of color – anyone who feels called to attend" (www.wildernesstorah.org). Directed to children, youths, and adults, "Wilderness Torah's mission is to awaken and celebrate the earth-based traditions of Judaism, to nourish the connection between self, community, earth, and Spirit" (www.wildernesstorah.org). The programs of Wilderness Torah include multigenerational holiday retreats, nature and mentorship-based youth education, young adult leadership training, and various community-building initiatives, usually practiced in special retreats during the Sabbath. Experiencing Jewish religious life in natural settings, Wilderness Torah and the other two organizations mentioned above seek to take Judaism out of the built environment and to recover

the deep connection between "self, community, earth, and Spirit." However, to do so, Wilderness Torah must engage in community building that must face similar challenges to those facing the established Jewish community the organization criticizes. Sustaining Jewish life for future generations is indeed a difficult task.

Berkeley, California, is also the home of another environmental organization – Urban Adamah – that manages an educational farm and community center that "integrate the practices of the Jewish tradition, mindfulness, sustainable agriculture, and social action to build loving, just, and sustainable communities." It was founded by Adam Berman, an environmental activist who began his career in the Teva Learning Center and then served as the Executive Director of the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center (2002–2009). In 2010 he founded ADAMAH: The Jewish Environmental Fellowship on the campus of Urban Adamah in Berkeley as a "a three-month leadership training program for Jewish young adults that integrates Jewish learning and living with sustainable agriculture, ecological literacy, leadership training and contemplative spiritual practice" and served as its director until 2019. Urban Adamah manages a small urban farm, a summer camp for children, and the residential fellowship that weaves the themes of mindfulness, food justice, and social action. The focus on farming and food justice has been shared by the Jewish food movement to be mentioned below.

Two other nationally known environmental spiritual leaders cum activists and educators are Rabbi David Seidenberg and Rabbi Shmuli Yanklowitz, who were mentioned above. Seidenberg promotes Neo-Hasidism as an ecological spirituality, whereas Yanklowitz integrates Halakhic Judaism Orthodox style with social activism. Located in the Boston area, Rabbi Seidenberg disseminates his eco-Judaism through his website, NeoHasid.org, and through scholar-in-residence programs, lectures, and seminars to various Jewish organizations. Based in Phoenix, Rabbi Yanklowitz founded and manages several organizations that seek to make Modern Orthodoxy more socially engaged. His various initiatives – Valley Beth Midrash, Uri L'Tzedek: Orthodox Social Justice, SHAMAYIM: Jewish Animal Welfare, YATOM: The Jewish Foster Adoption Network, and Arizona Jews for Justice – are all projects that illustrate how a spiritual entrepreneur can spread a certain message based on personal charisma, fundraising abilities, networking and organizational skills, and the savvy use of digital technology. These organizations suggest a certain critical stance toward the established institutions of the American Jewish community and a deliberate attempt to make environmental spirituality central to Jewish identity individually and collectively.

3.3 *Advocacy Work*

Spiritual entrepreneurs can transform the lives of individual Jews and even create communities, but to effect significant environmental transformation necessitates working with legislators on local, regional, and national levels. Several Jewish organizations are most aware of this reality and have focused their effort on advocacy, policy, and politics. The Coalition of Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) best represents the awareness that to address environmental problems, political pressure is necessary. COEJL was established in 1993 as a project of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JSPA), a national hub of the community relations network representing 125 local Jewish community relations councils and 16 national Jewish agencies, including the four main denominations of American Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist). Since its establishment in 1944, JSPA has advocated and mobilized to impact political and societal change in the U.S. regarding pluralism, human rights, and Israel's quest for security. COEJL's goal was "to deepen and broaden the Jewish community's commitment to stewardship and protection of the Earth through outreach, activism and Jewish learning" and the leadership of COEJL has worked closely with members of Congress to promote environmental legislation such as energy efficiency, energy independence and security, and protection of land and water resources. COEJL's political advocacy has complemented its commitment "to build core Jewish knowledge on environmental issues, while serving as a Jewish voice in the broader interfaith community" (www.coejl.org). As a trans-denominational organization, COEJL partners with the Religion Action Center for Reform Judaism, the Rabbinic Assembly of Conservative Judaism, and Reconstructing Judaism, and represents the Jewish voice in interfaith organizations such as the National Religious Partnership for the Environment and Interfaith Power and Light.

Since the 2000s climate change has become the focus of environmental advocacy (Jacob 2013) with organizations such as Jewish Earth Alliance, Jewish Climate Action Network, and Dayenu: A Jewish Call to Climate Action. I already mentioned these organizations above and noted that they are led by women – Dr. Mirele Goldsmith founded the first two organizations, and Rabbi Jennie Rosenn founded the third organization. Indeed, women have been most active in Jewish environmental organizations as leaders, educators, and activists (Krone 2022). Among the Jewish female environmental activists are the late Roberta Kalechofsky (d. 2022), the animal rights activist who founded Jews for Animal Rights and created Micah Publications to publish on Judaism, animal rights, and vegetarianism; Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, who founded the Baltimore Jewish Environmental Network and who has been active in the

Committee of Laws and Standards of Conservative Judaism; Judith Belasco, the Executive Vice President of Hazon who oversaw the development of the program Outdoor, Food, Farming and Environmental Education (JOFEE); Rabbi Jill Hammer, the founder and director of Tel Shemesh, a website community celebrating and creating Earth-based Jewish tradition fused with feminist Judaism; Evonne Marzouk, the founder of Canfei Nesharim; Nili Simhai, the nature educator of Teva Nature Center; Karyn Moskowitz, who founded New Roots, a nonprofit organization that works to develop a just and sustainable food system in the Ohio River Valley region; the philosopher Judith Plaskow, who promoted an ecofeminist interpretation of Judaism (Plaskow 2005; 2016), and Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb, a Reconstructionist Rabbi, who put worship of the female aspect of God, the Shekhinah, at the center of Jewish ecological spirituality (Gottlieb 1995). If Plaskow, Gottlieb, and Hammer define themselves as ecofeminists, other female environmental activists care more about integrating Judaism and environmentalism than about ecofeminism.

Climate activism is particularly relevant to young Jews who will be most impacted by climate change. Young Jews have joined millions of other youths around the world in demanding immediate action on climate change. In 2019 Hazon has founded the Jewish Youth Climate Movement (JYCM) as a generation Z-led movement that is dedicated to combating climate change and environmental destruction while "reinvigorating the Jewish tradition and inspire social change by rising up collectively against the climate crisis" (slingshotfind.org). Focusing on the Jewish command "justice, justice you shall pursue" (Deut. 16:20), JYCM seeks to build sustainable and equitable world for all and focuses on collective action toward climate justice as a central and defining feature of Jewish identity in the 21st century. The initiative runs a series of public programs, training and campaigns at Jewish schools, synagogues, institutions, and cities across the U.S. and engages over 20,000 people through programs campaigns, social media, and a monthly newsletter. The current sabbatical year has inspired the Shmita Campaign of the Jewish Youth Climate Movement as much as it inspired environmental mindfulness in the Diaspora and in Israel. The biblical practice of the sabbatical year, according to which the land must lie fallow every seventh year and debts should be released, has become the major inspiration for Jewish environmentalists who criticize capitalism, consumerism, and the fetishism of technology (Krone 2015; Krantz 2012; Lavi 2022).

3.4 *Food and Farming Movement*

Food has always been the mark of Jewish identity, but today food is also used as a distinctive way to fuse Judaism and environmentalism. The most systematic attempt to implement the ideal of sustainability is the Jewish Food Movement,

which promotes sustainable food systems (Schorsch 2018). Inspired by the Jewish Renewal movement, the Jewish food movement seeks to renew Jewish identity with advocacy for sustainable food and a return to religious traditions as a way to sustain the Jewish community (Most 2016; Silvern 2021). The Jewish food movement was launched by Hazon in 2007 as a two-pronged effort "to help the Jewish community to have some impact in creating a sustainable world for everybody, while on the other hand, using that process of getting the Jewish world more focused on the environment to strengthen Jewish life" (Savage 2016). In 2010 Hazon hosted the first food conference at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center and this annual event has become the primary venue for the gathering of Jewish environmental activists who care about ethical eating, connecting the sacred and agricultural rhythms of Jewish life, the sources of foods and ecosystems, and food policy and food justice. The Jewish food movement has broadened the application of eco-kosher, supported Jewish educational farms, Jewish food education, Jewish involvement in the U.S. Farm Bill, new ethical practices in the kosher meat business, and serious consideration of what observance of the sabbatical year might mean in the 21st century. The annual conferences help participants to develop meaningful relationships with the natural world, deepen their connection to the Jewish tradition, and network with other like-minded Jews. Commitment to the alleviation of poverty is the primary ethical value that informs the Jewish food movement, and making food accessible and affordable is a crucial response to the suffering of poverty. By putting Jewish economic resources behind local organic farms, the Jewish food movement gives produce to people in need and makes healthy food more readily available. Along the Jewish food movement there has been a revival of Jewish farming in the U.S., taking its inspiration from Jewish agricultural utopian communes at the turn of the 20th century (Herscher 1982), but with an explicit focus on organic farming and other ecological practices. In 2017 the Jewish Farmer Network was founded to "mobilize Jewish wisdom to build a more just and regenerative food system for all." Linking over 2000 Jewish farmers who work at the nexus of sustainable agriculture, food justice, and Jewish life, the Jewish Farmer Network facilitates community building around the ethics and rhythms of Jewish agrarianism and providing space for Jews of all denominations and gender identities to reclaim and embody ancestral knowledge while renewing Jewish land stewardship practices.

4 Conclusion

Jewish environmentalism, this essay has argued, has accomplished a lot since the early 1970s. Today Jewish environmentalism is manifested in an academic

discourse on Judaism and ecology, numerous programs and initiatives to green Jewish institutions, and many environmental organizations that engage in education, identify formation and community building, environmental advocacy, and organic farming. Applying the ethics of care and responsibility (Tirosh-Samuelson 2017; 2023) to heal our wounded planet, Jewish environmentalism illustrates the contemporary post-secular moment in which religion refuses to be identified with a set of beliefs or to be relegated to the private sphere, insisting instead that Judaism is relevant to all aspects of life, including the treatment of the natural world. Cutting across the denominational spectrum of the organized Jewish community in the U.S., Jewish environmentalism has addressed a wide range of environmental problems that are currently lumped together under the rubric of "climate change." Bridging theory and practice, learning and action, Jewish environmentalism encourages Jews to live sustainably and addresses global problems in a distinct Judaic idiom. Helped by the digital and the communication revolutions, Jewish environmentalism has effectively disseminated its redemptive activism, offering Jews new and creative ways to practice Judaism outside the synagogue and beyond the study of sacred texts. As the severity of the eco-crisis becomes ever more present, it is reasonable to assume that Jewish environmentalism will continue to grow, but securing it financially remains a persistent challenge. The highly decentralized structure of American Jewry undermines the cohesiveness of Jewish environmentalism as a social movement, but it also facilitates creative innovations and experimentations. To become more impactful, Jewish environmentalism will do well to work more closely with interfaith environmental organizations to secure the future of our planet, our common home.

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Indigenous Shamanic Worldviews as Eco-cosmologies and Indigenous Knowledge Systems of Sustainability

Research Article

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Abstract

This article discusses shamanic worldviews theoretically and empirically based on the author's long-term comparative studies in rural regions of Odisha, India. It deals with local eco-cosmological worldviews expressed in trance traditions, interpreted by the author as expressions of contemporary shamanic worldviews and an indication of ways of transmission of indigenous knowledge. In this sense the comparative examples of shamanic traditions of *nag bacca* (snake children) and *alekh gurumai* (ritual specialists) in Odisha are examples of transformative healing through trance rituals based both on concepts of holy craziness and sacred play (*baaya/kheelo*) and on spirit possession rituals (*boil*), widely spread in cultures of orality.

In shamanic worldviews, therianthropic transformations of animal human and ecological encounters are transmitted in a rich culture of orality expressed in songs, performances, and trance dances. In this indigenous knowledge transmission, visions and dreams are the most important expressions of shamanic imaginaries, realities, epistemologies, and ontologies, revealing imagined, dreamt, and lived experiences of local shamanic societies. In this way, the visual mental imagery experiences construe the inner and outer knowledge of shamanic life worlds and worldviews.

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Keywords

eco-cosmologies – indigenous knowledge – shamanic worldviews

1 Introduction to Shamanism

Research on shamanism is fascinating and broad, offering anthropological, intellectual, philosophical, and spiritual alternatives to viewing one's own life and perceiving the world. I propose in this article to view shamanic worldviews as non-dualistic, dialogical eco-cosmologies. I understand eco-cosmologies as indigenous knowledge systems on sustainability (see also Guzy 2011). Eco-cosmologies are worldviews and life worlds relating the human with the non-human, the cosmos, and the other-than-human sphere such as trees, animals, rivers, and mountains and responding with indigenous knowledge and experience to non-human and other-than-human challenges to existence. Contemporary indigenous ecological knowledge systems are transmitted through spiritual and ecological ritual practices and relate to indigenous shamanic worldviews and their ritual specialists (Århem 1996, 166–84; Kopenawa and Albert 2013) representing a profoundly non-dualistic perspective on human and non-human agencies in a mutually shared world and cosmos.

With the ecological destruction alongside the modernization and rationalization project of modernity disconnecting the human from the non-human, most valuable local knowledge resources and eco-cosmological worldviews have been endangered and had to adopt to dramatic landscape and cultural changes. Simultaneously with the ecological destruction, indigenous cultures also continued to be devalued, ridiculed, and belittled as they were opposed to a scientific and materialistic worldview of urban western knowledge cultures.

Indigenous knowledge traditions and ritual practices could however today be key in finding local and global solutions for a sustainable local and global world of cultural and eco-biological diversity and mutuality. In an eco-cosmological worldview, ontological pluralities include the diverse perspectives of humans, non-humans, and other-than-human elements regarding each other, interconnecting with each other as different personalities in a mutually interconnected world and cosmos (see Viveiros de Castro 2015). With the ontological turn in French anthropology (Descola 1992; Descola 2005; Descola 2013; Viveiros de Castro 1998; 2015) as well as the discourse on neo-animism (Harvey 2005), hegemonic anthropocentric and dualistic perspectives have

been broadly questioned in anthropology and in the study of religions. An emerging "new kind of ecological anthropology" (Descola and Pálsson 1996, 2) has since then been blurring the supposed clear demarcation line between nature and culture, opening up new approaches to understanding alternative indigenous taxonomies, epistemologies, hermeneutics, and ecologies.

Studies on shamanisms offer an important path to the non-dualistic understanding of the world and cosmos. Shamanism is regarded today as a variety of similar phenomena in indigenous North American, South American, and South Asian cultures. Contemporary shamanisms are in this vein embedded in analogous ecological knowledge systems always relating to indigenous cosmologies, ontologies (Kopenawa and Albert 2013), and indigenous hermeneutics (see Carlos Miguel Gomez 2021).

I am using the term "shamanism" in Atkinson's sense as a comparative concept. In her article, Atkinson (1992, 307–30) discusses various themes raised by the scholarly constructed models of shamanism. Aware of the critiques of this Western category, she nevertheless postulates maintaining the concept in a plural form: "shamanisms." In this way the cultural, historical, and social specificity of local practices can be ensured (Atkinson 1992, 321) and the continuity of the interdisciplinary dialogue guaranteed – regardless of ethnographic results. In this vein, indigenous shamanisms include classical shamanic cultures of Siberia and Inner Asia, South Asia, and North and South America. Also, prehistorical forms of shamanic cultures can be found in rock art and archaeological settings. Urban contemporary shamanisms also emerge as neo-shamanisms in diverse current cultural urban settings of the global world (see von Stuckrad 2002).

Shamanism as an academic term was first documented in Siberia "as a practice centred upon a person who could communicate with paranormal beings and use the powers of those beings for the benefit of clients. Western audiences were both fascinated and perplexed by this extraordinary, unfamiliar, and seemingly bizarre phenomenon" (Sidky 2010, 213 citing Hutton 2001, vii). Later, similar religious phenomena were observed in North and South America, Indonesia, Oceania, and elsewhere. In the classical Siberian context, the term "shaman" derives from Tunguz šaman, the Tungusic language of the Evenki in eastern Siberia. "Shamanism" defined pre-eminently a religious phenomenon of Siberia and Inner Asia documented and described by the earliest travelers to their different regions in the 19th century. Throughout the immense area comprising central and northern regions of Asia, the religious/ritual life of local societies centered around the ritual ecstatic female and male specialist, generally called the "shaman."

Shamanism is

> sometimes said to be the earliest religion, the original religion. In fact, there is no evidence that could prove or disprove such a claim. To the contrary, it is certainly the case that every shaman living today utilizes skills and knowledge that are entirely appropriate to the contemporary world. Shamans and their communities are not "primitive" and do not provide evidence of what the first human ancestors did or thought. Similarly, it is sometimes claimed that shamanism is a religion eminently suited to the nomadic lifestyle of people who hunt and gather their food rather than growing it or trading it. While it is likely that the first humans were nomadic hunter-gatherers, shamans are employed in almost every conceivable style of culture (Harvey and Wallis 2007, xv).

Shamanism cannot be understood as a unified and institutionalized religion. Rather, it is a complex of different rites and beliefs surrounding the activities of the ritual specialist, the shaman, connected with very different ritual and belief systems. With the classical definitions proposed by Mircea Eliade (1964), shamanism is based on the phenomenon of ecstasy connected to the ritual centrality of the shaman, who "remains the dominating figure, for throughout the vast area of Asia in which the ecstatic experience is considered the religious experience par excellence, the shaman, and he alone, is the great master of ecstasy. A first definition of the complex phenomenon of shamanism – and perhaps the least hazardous – is that it is a technique of ecstasy" (Mircea Eliade 2005, 269).

As Anna-Leena Siikala further explains, shamanism is founded

> on a special technique for achieving ecstasy by means of which the shaman enters an altered state of consciousness, and on the idea that the shaman is accompanied by helping spirits who assist him in this state. While in a state of trance, the shaman is regarded as capable of direct communication with representatives of the otherworld, either by journeying to the supranormal world or by calling the spirits to the séance. He is thus able to help his fellow men in crises believed to be caused by the spirits and to act as a concrete mediator between this world and the otherworld in accompanying a soul to the otherworld, or fetching it from the domain of the spirits. The shaman acts as a healer and as a patron of hunting and fertility, but also as a diviner, the guardian of livelihood (Siikala 2005, 8280).

Within the academic discussion, the question whether shamanism is a universal phenomenon or only a Siberian one remains debated. A wider application of the concept of shamanism outside its origins in Siberia is criticized by some who prefer referring to shamanism only as a phenomenon inside the Siberian context (see for example Zinser 1991, 17–26 and Motzki 1977).

Today's consensus on shamanism defines shamanism as shared characteristics of shamanic ritual practices, worldviews, and spiritual experiences in North and South America, Indonesia, Oceania, Siberia, Inner Asia, and South Asia. I am convinced that through cultural comparisons, the term shamanism can on the one hand express the specificity of a local spiritual tradition and on the other hand depict cultural universals. The synonymous use of eco-cosmology as an alternative description of shamanism is crucial to juxtapose shamanism discourses with today's sustainability models proposed by the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which remain focused on a developmental and neoliberal agenda devaluing indigenous taxonomies as alternatives to modernity. The SDGs lack the local indigenous perspective and should be corrected by shamanic knowledge and wisdom.

2 Centrality of the Shaman

Shamanic cultures center around a particularly spiritually gifted individual, whose greatest gift is the talent of interspecies communication, generally designated with the academic umbrella term "shaman." The term relates to a multitude of indigenous terms depicting a ritual specialist and interspecies communicator and mediator who uses diverse techniques of altered states of consciousness and "specializes" in trance states, during which his or her soul is believed to leave the body and to ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld in order to communicate with other-than-human species, such as ancestors, spirits, animals, or trees.

Ever more cross-cultural studies confirm that shamans are interspecies communicators and healers who use altered states of consciousness to interact with the spirit world on behalf of their communities. They are universally found in human cultures – from prehistory to contemporary times (see Vitebsky 2001). Shamans are remarkably similar in hunter-gatherer societies around the world but differ from healing practitioners of other societies that have agriculture, political hierarchies, and class systems. A shaman thus can be understood cross-culturally as a specialist of the spirits, a local healer, an interspecies communicator related to particular animal–human–non-human communication, transformations, and metamorphosis (therianthropy). The

shaman uses highly symbolic musical instruments such as drums and often entheogenic plants during trance sessions to enable spiritual trance journeys and spiritual communication techniques. Spiritual journeys and spiritual traveling within a cosmic tripartite structure of an upperworld–world–underworld are common. Animal helper spirits such as iconic birds (e.g., eagles) or carnivorous mammals (e.g., tigers) helping the ritual specialist to communicate with demons, nature spirits, and the dead within spiritual journeys are also frequently found.

A shaman's personality often combines an overly sensitive and individualistic character who deeply experienced a personal physical and/or psychological crisis. The long history of individual suffering and the shaman's capacity to heal him/herself through transformative powers, turning illness, weakness, or spiritual attack into healing, strength, and spiritual victory, relates always to a strong personality and unconventional behavior differing from others with a strong aesthetic and intellectual creativity. There is a vital role of initiation and ecstatic dreams leading to a recognition of a shaman's vocation or call, as Mircea Eliade observes:

> Among many Siberian and Inner Asian tribes, the youth who is called to be a shaman attracts attention by his strange behaviour; for example, he seeks solitude, becomes absentminded, loves to roam in the woods or unfrequented places, has visions, and sings in his sleep. In some instances this period of incubation is marked by quite serious symptoms; among the Yakuts, the young man sometimes has fits of fury and easily loses consciousness, hides in the forest, feeds on the bark of trees, throws himself into water and fire, cuts himself with knives. The future shamans among the Tunguz, as they approach maturity, go through a hysterical or hysteroid crisis, but sometimes their vocation manifests itself at an earlier age – the boy runs away into the mountains and remains there for a week or more, feeding on animals, which he tears to pieces with his teeth. He returns to the village, filthy, bloodstained, his clothes torn and his hair disordered, and it is only after ten or more days have passed that he begins to babble incoherent words (Eliade 2005: 8270).

Shamanic dreams and visions are a crucial characteristic of shamanic initiations. They indicate the exceptionality and individuality of the shamanic personality and they ultimately create a call for this dangerous, inconvenient ritual seer's specialization of the spiritual realm – a spiritual and astral traveler and a spiritual communicator, fighter, and transformational healer (see Guzy 2021a).

3 Shamanism as Dialogical Healing

Following Vitebsky's classification (2001), shamanism, contrary to its "-ism," can be regarded as a universal spiritual phenomenon which does not indicate any sort of unified doctrine or canonization of content. Instead, the ritual practices of ecstasy, the centrality of ritual specialists, and healing and linguistic practices (see also Walker 2001, 35–60) form the starting points of this analytical classification of shamanism. "Shamanism is not a single, unified religion, but a cross-cultural form of religious sensibility and practice … Shamanism is scattered and fragmented and should not be called an "-ism" at all. There is no doctrine, no world shamanic church, no holy book as a point of reference, no priest with the authority to tell us what is and what is not correct" (Vitebsky 2001, 11).

However, as Vitebsky notices, there are astonishing cultural similarities in shamanic societies, such as recurring motifs of 1) an initiation of the ritual specialists, the shamans, 2) the traveling between worlds, and 3) the existence of benevolent and malevolent non-human beings, such as spirits. Recalling Sudhir Kakar (1982), a shaman "is a specialist in a non-Western culture who relieves and heals anxiety" (Kakar 1982, 92). In this vein, Kakar also classifies local Indian Hindu healing specialists as shamans. These, following the analysis of Lévi-Strauss (1974, 213–34), resemble the American Indian healers who use a symbolic language to heal through symbolic efficacy (Kakar 1982, 94).

In *Dialogues with the Dead: The Discussion of Mortality among the Sora of Eastern India* (1993), Piers Vitebsky deals with the concept of continuity among the indigenous Sora of Odisha, their ideas of death and the afterlife, and, connected with these, the concept of the individual and of personality in Sora shamanism. The book is organized around indigenous dialogues between the living and the dead. For the dialogue with the dead, the Sora need mediators (*kuran*) between the worlds of the dead and the living, whom Vitebsky translates as "shaman" (Vitebsky 1993, 18). These shamans, mostly women, but also men, put themselves into a dissociated state of consciousness – trance – in order to become receptive to the possession by a dead person's spirit. The dead person's spirit then speaks through the female or male shaman (1993, 5). The living people present at the ritual gathering embrace the dead person (embodied by the shaman), argue intensely with him or her, cry, laugh, or hit or caress the embodied deceased. The shaman, embodying the deceased during the ritual, is confronted with extremes of emotions. For Vitebsky, such emotional dialogues represent not only expressions of communication with the afterworld, but also the feelings of the collective and the individual. Among the Sora there are two types of shamans: the funeral shamans (usually women), who take

over more important ritual roles, and female or male divinatory shamans who heal through sacred oracles or auguries (divination). Male and female shamans of the Sora undertake spiritual "journeys" that a "normal" person only experiences once – namely with the parting of the soul from the body at the time of physical death. The shaman, however, returns to the living after having gone to the underworld, where he or she performs dialogues with the dead to comfort and heal the living. His or her quality and qualification as a shaman, as a spiritual mediator and communicator, is the fact that he or she comes back from the astral journey to the world of the spirits, to transmit and communicate the message of the dead to the living.

The shaman of the Sora heals with dialogues and with verbal communication, mediating in this way between the dead and the living. The shamanic worldview as documented meticulously by Vitebsky can be defined as explicitly dialogical and communicative.

3.1 *Alekh Shamanism in Koraput, Southern Odisha*

Kakar's descriptions of the therapeutic and ritual specialists of the Indian indigenous Oraon (Kakar 1982, 95–111) as well as Vitebsky's documentations correspond with my own ethnographic observations of indigenous *alekh gurumai,* ritual specialists and local shamans in Koraput, southern Odisha (Guzy 2002, 2020) whom I too consider spiritual mediators, communicators, and dialogical healers.

Koraput is the southern district of the predominantly Adivasi tribal/indigenous state of Odisha. Despite processes of colonization, modernization, and industrialization as well as dynamics of Christian and neo-Hindu proselytization, rural southern Odisha has retained a predominantly tribal/Adivasi character with a strong autochthonous cultural Adivasi kinship and social structures. These include the values of seniority and diversified bride price marriage rules ranging from cross-cousin marriage to marriage by elopement and "stealing." Adivasi cultures in southern Koraput however never lived in isolation but integrated Hindu cultural elements through Sanskritization processes and the inclusion of Hindu gods and goddesses while simultaneously retaining their Adivasi religious character of ancestor worship, abstract concepts of the divine, multifaceted practices of divination, oracles, local shamanism, and the ritual use of alcohol and animal/buffalo sacrifices.

"Desya" is the general indigenous term shared by all people living outside of the towns in the hinterland hills of Koraput. Desya literally means "locals." It is a sociocultural complex of diverse ethnic categories relating to each other describing many ethnic and sociocultural subcategories including Rona, Mali,

Gauro, Didai, Gadaba, Dombo, Ghasi, and Chondal. All groups speak Desya, a local dialect of Oriya, besides other local languages such as Kui or Gutob.[1]

At the administrative level, Desya is associated with the formal categories of Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and Scheduled Castes.[2] Central for the indigenous Desya (= local) population of Koraput are diversified non-Brahmin ritual specialists (*pujari*) and local shamans (*gurumai/alekh gurumai*) who are characterized through the phenomenon of ecstatic ritual singing, oracles, and divination practices.

In my research on alekh shamanism in Koraput (southern Odisha) between 1999 and 2002 I observed and documented the dialogical and communicative nature of a local shamanic worldview (Guzy 2002, 2007, 2020). This worldview was based on strong ritual specialism and transcendental spiritual journeys of ritual specialists of the god Alekha[3] as well as the earth goddess Basmati or Basudha. Ecstatic ritual specialists (*alekh gurumai*) among the Desya are capable of divine communication. Accompanied by the sound of the *dudunga*, a one-stringed idiophone made out of a dry melon, *alekh gurumai* will perform vocal rituals and utter prophecies and narrations and give spiritual advice and consolation. Following Kakar (1982), Vitebsky (1993, 1995), Vargyas (1993, 120–27; ibid 1994, 123–75), and Atkinson (1992, 307–30), I call these local religious specialists "alekh shamans." After their initiation (*dikhya*) they are also regarded as husbands or wives of the earth goddess (Basudha Ma/Basmati Ma) or also other male and female Hindu deities and become singers of the Divine. Biographies of the mostly female *alekh gurumai*s show the very personal transformation that this process of "becoming" a shaman and divine ecstatic singer entails: the transformation of individual suffering into a self-healing, enabling them to eventually heal others. At night, the *alekh gurumai* sits on the ground with loose hair and the instrument in her[4] hands, keeping her eyes closed. She is singing for herself and for the sake of those who suffer. Those who are sleepless or those who "carry some pain (*dukho*) in their heart"[5] gather to listen to the voices of gods. This is possible because during the performance, people say, the god Alekha and the goddess Basmati speak through and out of the shaman and appease the afflictions of the listeners. Three central features mark the ritual performance, namely *baaya* (holy craziness), *kheelo* (play), and *dudunga* (one-stringed idiophone).

1 I use an anglicized transliteration here.

2 For more details see: Pfeffer 1997; Otten 2000; Berger 2001.

3 *alekha* = the unwritten, indescribable.

4 Since there are empirically more female *alekh gurumai* than male I use the female form for description. Males are included in the generalization.

5 Free translation of an often-used expression.

During the ritual performance, the shaman enters an altered state of consciousness that is characterized by a ritual "madness." However, this is not considered a pathological madness. The "*gurumai is baaya*," people explain, but it is "*good baaya*," a beneficial and, most important, divine "craziness." This is also underlined by the fact that after regaining consciousness, the *alekh gurumai* will not remember even a single word expressed during her trance and journey to the world of the dead, ancestors, gods, and goddesses (see Guzy 2007).

The second element, *kheelo* (play), relates to the "playful" character of the ritual performance. The sacred madness of the alekh gurumai is expressed through unsystematic song compositions, poetic fragments, and hymnal sequences. The vocal expressions appear impulsive, spontaneous, and situational according to the specific mood of the alekh gurumai. Moreover, her speeches and songs composed during her altered state of consciousness are often incomprehensible. Her sacred utterances and songs can thus be regarded as fragments of what Thomas and Humphrey (1994, 1) have termed "inspirational religious practices."

The third basic element of the shamanic performance is the ritual instrument *dudunga*, the one-stringed musical instrument that is only used by *alekh gurumai*. It is this instrument that structures the temporality of the performance to a large extent and, indeed, the whole ritual grammar of *baaya* and *kheelo* is based upon the music of the idiophone. Repetitive and monotonous in its rhythm, the *dudunga* is directive for the development of the séance by inducing an altered state of consciousness, by accompanying the divine singing and, finally, also by terminating *baaya* and *kheelo* and as such the performance itself, which usually lasts two to three hours.

Alekh shamans in Koraput transmit and mediate a rich oral culture and demonstrate how ritual language and songs are used for ritual and social transformation, spiritual consolation, and finally individual and social healing.

3.2 *Shamanic Transformations in Western Odisha – Nag Bacca (the Children of the Snake) and Their Rituals*

Ecstatic musical performances and shamanic transformations can also be observed in the western part of Odisha, the Bora Sambar region, where I have conducted further extensive comparative fieldwork research since 2002 until present (Guzy 2008; 2013). Historically, the Raj Bora Sambar can first be traced as an autonomous little kingdom or rather chiefdom of the indigenous Binjhal population, bordering on the tributary Princely State of Patna. Bora Sambar, according to the Bengal District Gazetteers on Sambalpur of 1909, belonged to the Maharajas of Patna, "who were the head of a cluster of States known as the Athara Garhjat (the 18 forts)" (O'Malley 2007 (1909), 21). Bora Sambar

presumably was one of the Athara Garhjats, whose chiefs were indigenous Binjhal. Anthropological research on Princely States in Odisha has shown the important role of indigenous or tribal communities in establishing a regional autonomy of the local sovereigns, of so-called "little kings" (Schnepel 2002).

Entranced, musically powerful divine spirit possession rituals happen frequently in the Bora Sambar region of Western Odisha. These spirit possession rituals can be counted into the shamanic worldviews of indigenous India.

Nag bacca – literally "the snake children" – is a local shamanic trance and possession tradition combining the veneration of the snake god Nag – an eco-cosmological local deity identified with the Pan-Indian Hindu god Shiva – with male peer group and initiation rituals, indigenous theatre, martial arts performance, music, and shamanic healing traditions (Guzy 2015, 94–115). It is mostly performed by young men from villages with mixed indigenous and Hindu caste communities of Binjhal, Gond, Mali, and Telli. A *nag bacca* group consists of around 25 to 30 young, mostly unmarried men, often of a comparatively fragile and feminine physical appearance. They have joined the group on their own decision, after having undergone a ritual initiation through an older guru, the keeper of a sacred and specialized knowledge (*vidya*) and an experienced master in the disciplines of *nag bacca*. The *nag bacca* group will be invited by those who need a spiritual and physical cure by the shamanic transformative healing ceremonies for god Nag.

Particularly in the months of October (*dusshara*) and December (*maxir*), *nag bacca* groups perform healing rituals (*nag bacca puja*) on Mondays. Once started, these rituals have to be continued for seven successive Mondays. On the seventh Monday the concluding and most important sequence of the *nag bacca* ritual takes place in the form of the *binu jatra*, the veneration of the earthen snake hole, a transformative trance ritual that finds its climax before the earthen hole of a cobra in the midst of the jungle.

Before the start of the *binu jatra*, the members of the *nag bacca* group have to fast for one day. It is told that after fasting the *nag bacca* consume *godd*, an allegedly poisonous substance whose ingredients are kept secret. The taking in of *godd* has various functions. It is a crucial part of the initiation into the *nag bacca* group. Furthermore, it is said to be a counterpoison against snakebites, that when ingested bestows transformative healing powers on its consumer. Having ingested *godd*, the *nag bacca* are held to have the power to heal snake and dog bites but also to heal muteness and deafness, barrenness and sufferings induced by *peten korab dusti* – the "bad eye," a local concept for the envious malevolence of others – and *dondei*, an indigenous concept of afflictions ascribed to external forces or influences, often translated by locals with the English term witchcraft. With the consumption of *godd*, which is distributed

to them by their guru, the young men are also held to gain the knowledge of certain mantras, secret orally transmitted verses or short sayings to which healing and magical power is attributed. The knowledge of the mantras is orally transmitted to the *nag bacca* only by their guru. Through the consumption of *godd*, the young men become initiated religious specialists, healers as well as members of a male peer group.

After *godd* has been consumed, a further preparation for the *binu jatra* takes place: to the sound of the *sulapar* – the sixteen holy rhythms of the trance ritual – played by the indigenous *ganda baja* inter-village orchestra (Guzy 2011), the *boil biha*, a "spiritual marriage" of the *nag bacca*, is performed. In a state of trance induced by the music of the *ganda baja*, each *nag bacca* "marries" his favorite god or goddess, which means that from now on he is considered a medium of the spirit of this deity. In indigenous Adivasi Middle India, spiritual marriages are a common symbolic idiom of exchange and communication with the divine realm and of a ritual shamanic specialization.[6] It is supposed that the *nag bacca* does not entirely become the god or goddess he embodies but that he acts as a medium for the deity's spirit (*boil asibe nag bacca pila upore*) while retaining his status as therapeutic shamanic specialist, who maintains his separate personal identity.

When the *ganda baja* village orchestra begins to play the *sulapar*, the sixteen trance rhythms, the group of the *nag bacca*, surrounded by the villagers, sets out toward the dense forest, where the hiding place of the cobra lies. The rhythms of *ganda baja* drive forward the entranced bodies of the *nag bacca* and direct the ritual crowd from the village toward the jungle. The musicians guide the divine spirits by their music. For the indigenous musicians, "*boil* will never come – they are too strong," a villager explains. The spiritually "untouchable" musicians thus lead the procession. During the procession, *boil*, the spirit of their respective spiritual spouse, possesses the *nag bacca* men. Villagers searching cure and advice for their sufferings and ailments now approach the snake children who, in their trance, are considered oracles and mediums of the divine spirits. But not only do sufferers that seek help approach the *nag bacca*. Also aggrieved and disappointed believers use the *nag bacca* as mediums to address their frustrations and aggressions to deities that did not fulfil their wishes, despite donations they made or severe ritual austerities they underwent. "Why have you not heard my plea?" shouts an angry man, "How much

6 As described by Vitebsky (1993) for Soara shamanism and by Otten (2010: 33–51) for the ritual healing specialists of the Rona of southern Orissa. "Spiritual marriages" are also a common notion among the alekh gurumai, the female ritual specialist of the new proselytizing ascetic religion Mahima Dharma in Koraput (Guzy 2002).

do you want to take from me? I will not give you any more sacrifice! You are a cheater!" In an alienated, rhythmically interrupted, and spasmodic hiccup, a *nag bacca* answers his reproaches: "Too much doubt in you, too much doubt. Don't look backward; believe my mantra. I will help!" The ritual disputation seems to relieve the accuser, and he calms down while the whole procession proceeds on its way deeper into the jungle. At times, the trance of the *nag bacca* men becomes wild and aggressive. They perform uncontrolled movements, often directed against themselves. In this situation, it is the task of the *nag bacca guru* to take care that the possessed snake children do not hurt themselves during their ecstasy.

At some place on their way through the jungle, the *ganda baja* musicians leading the procession stop. The marching crowd also comes to a halt. Now, a performance of the *nag bacca* unfolds which is part theatre, part display of acrobatics and martial arts, and part healing séance. This performance is called *devta khel* – god's play. In the *devta khel* each of the *nag bacca* represents the god or goddess he is held to have embraced in spiritual marriage. In a wild mimicry and pantomime the snake children embody their divine parts. The way in which the entranced *nag bacca* move and behave indicates the personality of the specific divine spirit (*boil*) which possesses them. On the basis of his gestures and movements, the gods and goddesses represented are immediately recognized by the audience.

The *nag bacca* performance is interwoven with elements of acrobatics and martial arts. With their bodies, the participants spontaneously form human pyramid structures of up to four meters' height. They also engage in mock duels, imitating fights while acrobatically avoiding any real bodily collision.[7] During their performance the snake children are considered divine oracles and spiritual healers. While the *nag bacca* performers are jumping, narrating, dancing, or fighting in a state of trance, they are again and again approached by participants of the procession. The *nag bacca* try to bite those approaching them, in order to suck out their inner poison (*onti*). The symbolical bite is held to be efficient against both mental and physical suffering.

The medical technique of sucking out the poison is in fact the common indigenous remedy for snake bites, which are a frequent accident in the region. The often life-threatening snake bites are treated by immediately sucking the poison from the body of the victim, followed by the application of a local antidote made from plants and roots. The *nag bacca* thus also act as the local medicine men for the cure of snake bites in everyday life.

7 The mock duels of the *nag bacca* performance are a variety of the regional martial arts performance *bari khel*, where artificial duels avoiding bodily contact are fought with wooden sticks.

Godd, the allegedly poisonous substance consumed by the *nag bacca*, is a cultural symbol of danger but also the symbol of a medical and social antidote. In medical terms, *godd* is the counterpoison against snake bites; in social terms, it represents the values of courage and body control. After having consumed *godd*, the *nag bacca* are considered "poisonous" by those around them. It is believed that babies up to the age of six months may die when they come into contact with the sweat of the *nag bacca*. If a suppliant is accidentally bitten by a "snake child" in the symbolic healing procedure of sucking the poison out during the *nag bacca* performance, it is believed that he is condemned to die soon. The ritual healing during *nag bacca* is thus conceived to be of a highly dangerous character for the help-seekers. The atmosphere between the audience and participants of the procession is simultaneously joyful and fearful. The audience laughs at the theatrical stunts performed by the embodied deities of *nag bacca*. However, the onlookers are filled with respect and fear when faced with the assumed spiritual and manifest physical powers of the snake children.

The male *nag bacca* group, which uses the cultural idiom of trance mediumship, symbolizes on the one hand the transcendent power of a divine play surpassing human control. On the other hand, on a human and social level, *nag bacca* symbolizes the handling of danger through courage and specialized sacred knowledge and body control, expressed by disciplined athletic and inventive body techniques such as martial arts, drama performance, and acrobatic movements. The initiated *nag bacca* performers also symbolize the ambivalence of power, which is potentially both curative and deadly, as the healing ritual always contains a risk for the suppliant. The help-seekers are obliged to give themselves over to the ritually and socially constructed authority of the *nag bacca*; otherwise, their lives might be at risk. In this manner a dangerous sacredness of the healing process and of the healer himself is established, an unquestioned – divine – hierarchy between the healer and the patient.

3.3 *Becoming a Nag Bacca*

"How does one become a *nag bacca*?" I asked several gurus and members of *nag bacca* groups. All agreed that "the idea and certainty to be elected to join a *nag bacca* group emerges through a dream." In a dream (*sapna*) the god Nag discloses his identity and calls the young man to serve him. The young man then starts to look for a *nag bacca* guru and group in the surrounding villages. It is only after examining his motives to become a *nag bacca* that the guru starts to teach him, to give him knowledge – *sikhya deba*. The term *sikhya deba* refers to the initiation, the teaching, and the training of the art of *nag bacca*. Central elements are the knowledge of the secret mantras, the technique of

treating snake bites by sucking out the poison as well as the preparation of herbal medicine, and a set of rules for an ascetic life conduct (*nyam*). The consumption of the allegedly poisonous *godd* initiates the *nag bacca* as transformative shamanic ritual specialists and healers.

The mantras represent secret orally transmitted and memorized verses or short sayings which are taught to the *nag bacca* adepts only by their guru. Each mantra is supposed to heal a particular ailment. They are uttered in a low voice or whisper by the *nag bacca* toward the patients approaching them during the *binu jatra* or other healing performances. Apart from the great *nag bacca* performances, healing procedures are enacted regularly during the ritual for the god Nag. Every Monday (*somwaro*), the day dedicated to the worship of Nag/Shiva, divine spirit possession/trance (*boil*) comes upon the snake children at the altar of the *nag bacca* (*nag bacca gudi/kutti*). Framed by the ritual music of village orchestras (*ganda baja*), the ecstatically moving *nag bacca* then heal snake bites or mental sufferings, conceptualized as poisonous substances in the patient's body, by symbolically biting and sucking the poison out of the patient. The art of sucking out the poison is said to rest upon long training and the spiritual advice of the guru. After the symbolical biting and sucking, the patient has to consume a medicine based on local roots and plants (*jori buti*). The ritual is then ended with recitations of mantras.

Each child of the snake is required to follow a set of strict rules of life conduct (*nyam*), which include the following ritual purity and impurity concepts and restrictions:

(1) The *nag bacca* do not take any medicine from an urban doctor.
(2) During the days of ritual performances, the *nag bacca* have to abstain from meat.
(3) *Nag bacca* have to restrain from fruits categorized as heating up (*kudru*) the body, for example the mango fruit.
(4) *Nag bacca* have to abstain from long vegetables (*purdha*).
(5) They are not allowed to take popcorn rice (*murhi*) from any household other than their own.
(6) They are not allowed to accept cooked rice from others.
(7) Before a *nag bacca* can perform a *binu puja*, he has to fast on the seven preceding Mondays.
(8) A *nag bacca* is not allowed to sleep in any kind of bed, but has to sleep on the ground.
(9) A snake child has to consult his patient with an empty stomach; after the consultation and healing ritual the *nag bacca* must wash extensively.

These restrictions indicate essential elements of indigenous ethno-medical and eco-cosmological knowledge transmitted through the *nag bacca* shamanic tradition. The interdiction to approach an urban doctor signifies a rejection of

the urban medical systems and consequently a general rejection of the use of Western medicine. It can be understood as a challenge to medical authorities that indicates a strong self-consciousness and a firm belief in the effectiveness of the *nag bacca*'s indigenous ethno-medical and ethno-herbal knowledge and practice of therapy. The temporary abstinence from meat in a society which values the meat of goats or fish as delicacies points to the common ritual idiom of temporary ascetic practice and vegetarianism connected to ritual specialization, which is often found in Middle Indian Adivasi societies.[8] Abstinence from meat is considered instrumental to gain perceptive clarity and in consequence ritual effectiveness. The idea of pursuing psycho-physical self-control through dietary restrictions is also expressed in the subsequent prescriptions. The idea of abstaining from fruits which are considered to "heat up" the human body as well as from long and thus "phallic" vegetables is directed at a curbing of erotic sensuality. The prohibition of eating popcorn rice prepared by others hints at general notions of the capacity of food to transport "impurity." In the South Asian idiom of "purity and impurity," food transactions are generally conceived as dangerous. Food is not "dead" or static. It has the capacity to take upon itself and thus to transport the dynamic substances of the "purity" or "impurity" of the food donor or cook, which in consequence affect the person digesting it. Particularly in cooked form, food is susceptible to the fluidity of "impurity." Uncooked food therefore can be more easily shared. *Murhi* – the popcorn rice – is commonly considered in Odisha as resistant to the transfer of impurity. However, the *nag bacca* even resist accepting *murhi* from any household other than their own. In this way, they underline their own extraordinary rigor in observing ritual cleanliness and rules of ritual purity. The principle of commensalism within one's own household, community, or caste is held to be fundamental to maintaining protection from impurity and represents a fundament of the Hindu caste hierarchy[9] as well as a basic social structure of the communal logic of indigenous Middle Indian Adivasi societies.[10] The idea of food purity is also underlined in the *nag bacca*'s rule of receiving patients with an empty stomach and washing themselves after the ritual trance therapy. In this way, a potential transfer of digested food substances from the *nag bacca*

8 Such as the Desya of Koraput (Berger 2001; Guzy 2002; Otten 2008).

9 On the connection between food, eating, commensalism, connubialism, and caste hierarchy, see Dumont (1986: 168–95); on food substances, impurity, and caste, see Marriott (1968: 133–72); on food as a potential bearer of pollutants, see also Douglas (1966: 33–35, 127).

10 An impressive example of commensality of food as a central value for an Adivasi society is given in Peter Berger's ethnography of the Gadaba of South Orissa (2007: 28–46) and Berger (2023).

to the patient shall be avoided. The patient can thus be sure he is addressing his ailments and sorrows to a truly pure – and thus effective – healer. The complete inner purity of the *nag bacca* is also held to heighten his capacity to absorb the psycho-social "dirt," the psychological suffering, of the patient. Having taken this "dirt" upon him and inside himself is the reason why the *nag bacca* have to wash themselves extensively after every therapeutic procedure.

The asceticism of the *nag bacca* is on the one hand based on the creation of purity and ritual cleanliness, on the other hand on the overcoming of fear, indicated by the rejection of beds. This is highly dangerous in an indigenous context due to the widespread peril of snakes that, moving on the ground, enter human dwellings, especially at night. The *nag bacca* tradition is a shamanic practice of male peer groups to develop the values of purity, courage, and psycho-physical power in order to control "inner impurity," namely sexual and in a wider sense sensual impulses and fears as well as external danger. In overcoming their own frailty, fear, and bodily inconveniences the *nag bacca* are supposed to transcend the problems of others.

Photographs on *nag bacca* as healing through transformations and communications

PHOTOGRAPHS 1 AND 2 Entranced *nag bacca*, Munda palli village, 2006, L.G.

PHOTOGRAPHS 3 AND 4 *Nag bacca* while treating a patient, Munda palli, 2006, L.G.

PHOTOGRAPH 5 A *nag bacca* while enquiring the divine sphere, Munda palli, 2006, L.G.

PHOTOGRAPHS 6 AND 7 *Nag bacca* at *binu jatra*, 2006, L.G.

PHOTOGRAPH 8 *Ganda baja* during *binu jatra*, L.G.

4 Conclusion: Shamanic Cultures as Indigenous Knowledge Traditions

The shamanic traditions of *nag bacca* and *alekh gurumai* in Odisha are examples of transformative healing trance rituals based on the local concepts of *baaya* ("holy craziness"), *kheelo* ("sacred play"), and spirit possession rituals (*boil*), widely spread in cultures of orality. The sound of the *dudunga* in Koraput initiates a sacred play (*baaya/kheelo*) which incites words and dialogues with the other sphere. During the performance of ecstatic singing, the voice and the poetic speech of the shaman become a manifestation of the Divine. As suggested by Roger Bastide (1997 (1975), 227–37), the Devine is "wildly" manifesting itself in the ecstatic, "wild" ritual poetry of the *alekh gurumai*. The ecstatic construction of the séance is crucial for its efficacy as a divine advice and healing ritual. In *alekh gurumai* vocal shamanic rituals a dynamic process of

reconciliation between the afflicted person and his or her social background can be seen. Through the process of negotiating the shaman's poetic words by the listeners, the ecstatic song performance creates a sort of social empathy. This collective understanding ultimately leads to the social healing of the afflicted person. The ecstatic song séance proves to be a ritual healing performance that reintegrates a fragile member into the local community.

In Western Odisha, *boil* (trance) in *nag bacca* seems on the one hand to represent a specific state of empowerment, giving the performers extraordinary forces to exert an eco-cosmological influence on those surrounding them, an influence that rises to the capability to heal medical, spiritual, psychological, or physical disorders and alleged or real poisoning. On the other hand, it is a highly exclusive category, as trance (*boil*) is not supposed to come upon everyone, but only upon "*nyam loko*," the "knowledgeable," the initiated and spiritually devoted religious specialists. *Boil* in *nag bacca* seems thus to represent a distinctive state of social and spiritual power of its young male performers. But this state reveals itself as highly ambivalent: male and female, authoritative and healing, precarious and always potentially dangerous, both for those attending the performance and for the performers themselves.

In *nag bacca* rituals the idea of evil and its handling is expressed in the cultural idiom of poison and antidote – *godd* – and its handling during the creative trance state of *boil*. Evil, in the local context, seems to represent a dangerous sphere of the humanly Other, imagined as the sacred and represented by the dangerous cobra snake. This kind of evil is not "evil" in a moral sense, but a perilous non-human Otherness. In the local mythology the cobra is sacred as this reptile has enormous digestive power (it can devour cows) and, like all snakes, it lives both in the ground and on the surface. In the Bora Sambar region, as all over India, snakes are generally worshipped as divine manifestations. The cobras' constant transferring from a subterranean "underworld" where the dead are supposed to live and the sphere of the humans above makes this reptile both dangerous and holy, transformative and transgressive. The dialogical encounters between the entranced *nag bacca* and the disappointed believers in the course of the *binu jatra* may be seen as a kind of practical theodicy, a performative justification of the embodied divine in the face of individual suffering and frustration.

The *nag bacca* tradition is a local shamanic practice to deal with suffering, and thus an example of a local healing tradition based on ritual music, trance mediumship, and the factual and symbolic removal of the individual psycho-social suffering as well as the physical poison of snake bites. In this context it is significant to note that a certain vulnerability and receptiveness seems prerequisite for acting as a *nag bacca*. Compared to the musicians, for whom "divine trance (*boil*) will not come" for they are spiritually "untouchable" and thus strong, the snake

children are young, unmarried, often feminine and sensitive men who due to their socio-psychological fragility are held to be especially receptive toward the divine. This vulnerability and psychological receptiveness become the basis for the ritual effectiveness of the snake children: touched by their spiritual spouses (*boil biha*) they transform their vulnerability and frailty into spiritual power and the communicative capacity to heal others. The performance of *nag bacca* turns out to be double-sided: On the one hand it celebrates the value of trance, in terms of a rejection of human control as a sign of divine presence. On the other hand, the value of the control of the body is celebrated through ascetic rules and athletic exercises. Another notable feature of double-sidedness or ambivalence in the *nag bacca* performance is the simultaneity and intermingling of tension, fear, danger, and a forceful presence of the divine with humoristic elements and outright comedy. The presence of joyful and humorous elements in the performance of the *nag bacca* constructs dynamics of tension and relaxation that are likely to contribute to the psychological and physical relief the patients experience during the ritual play.

4.1 *Shamanic Worldviews and Eco-cosmological Transformations*

In shamanic worldviews and life worlds (Guzy and Kapalo 2017: 3–5) the transformative experiences are strongly related to healing and intertwined with therianthropy, the cultural idea of shape-shifting between humans, non-human beings, and agencies (Beggiora 2013: 259–74). In shamanic worldviews therianthropic transformations of animal human and ecological encounters are transmitted in a rich culture of orality expressed in songs, performances, and trance dances. Within this indigenous knowledge transmission, visions and dreams are the most important expressions of shamanic imaginaries (Noll et al. 1985), realities, epistemologies, and ontologies revealing imagined, dreamt, and lived experiences of local shamanic societies. In this way, the visual mental imagery experiences construe the inner and outer knowledge of shamanic life worlds and worldviews.

As shamanic worldviews act always in relation to an external non-human and other-than-human world, their eco-cosmological characteristic is mediated through the relationship to trees, animals, spirits, and the earth. In Odisha among *alekh gurumai*s the earth and the tree play a crucial symbolic role to express the eco-cosmological axis between humans and non-humans. Trees represent altars which facilitate the entrance to the under and the upper world and thus represent connectivity to the spiritual world of divine entities and deceased personalities, they offer a relationship established in the ritual of ecstatic singing where the voice transcends and transforms the spheres and the spaces of suffering human, non-human, and other-than-human entities. Through interspecies and spiritual communication and through the relational

transformation, the shamanic worldview acts as an eco-cosmological sustainability of the social, spiritual, and ecological world.

In the indigenous *nag bacca* tradition of Western Odisha the transformative element of shapeshifting from human to snake through initiation and training indicates the specialized oral and performative indigenous knowledge based on specialized and secret knowledge of eco-cosmological (spiritual), ethno-medical powers of transformative communication between the human, the non-human, and the divine sphere.

It is widely acknowledged that indigenous knowledge systems in India include a variety of epistemologies (Saraswathi 1972) and different practices of epistemic transmissions ranging from literate traditions of text-based knowledge transmission to oral forms of knowledge including performing arts, crafts, spiritual speculations, and philosophies. The diverse indigenous knowledge forms and traditions of indigenous Adivasi communities in India are recognized for their contribution to the conservation and preservation of Indian ecological biodiversity through their distinctive eco-cosmological, ethnomedicinal, ethno-forestry, and ethno-agrarian knowledge practices (Sahoo and Kumar 2021; Sarangapani 2003).

I would like to suggest that interdisciplinary research on sustainability and the project of modernity needs to reconciliate, to reconsider, and to reevaluate indigenous shamanic eco-cosmological cultures as knowledge systems of sustainability.

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Research Ethics

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African Approaches to the Protection and Conservation of the Environment: The Role of African Traditional Religions

Research Article

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Abstract

In Africa the environment is sacrosanct and treated with great respect, particularly in communities where traditional beliefs and practices prevail. The sacredness of the environment is based on the African people's fundamental belief that the spiritual and the secular worlds are two sides of the same coin endowed with divine power and presence. As a result, the line of demarcation between the two worlds is blurred. They complement each other in the sense that each derives its meaning, significance and importance from the other. Since the natural world is imbued with the divine, it is considered an extension of the supernatural world. In the absence of written legal frameworks, the environment, in indigenous communities, is protected through religious beliefs and practices. This article analyses the basic approaches of the African people towards nature and their fundamental belief that the environment is an integral part of God's creation and must therefore be preserved and conserved for future generations. The article notes that in contemporary Africa the emphasis on material values is leading towards the total destruction of the environment, thus putting humanity at the intersection of self-destruction – something that needs to be avoided at all costs.

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Keywords

environment – sacredness – secularisation – hierophany – ubuntu – spirituality – degradation

1 Introduction

This article discusses African approaches to the protection and conservation of the environment from a phenomenological perspective with particular reference to the role played by African Traditional Religions, which are a common phenomenon in many African societies in sub-Saharan Africa. Though this region has a huge diversity of indigenous ethnic groups, they have a lot in common, particularly in regard to their indigenous religious beliefs, practices, spirituality, ethics and philosophy of life. These shape, guide and determine their relationship with the environment in which they are born, grow, die and are buried. The locus of their relationship with the environment is based on their understanding of the sacredness of nature. The article argues that the African concept of the sacred is all-pervasive, non-binary, communitarian, all-encompassing, interpenetrative and inclusive. The boundaries between the sacred and the profane, the pure and impure, the spiritual and the secular, matter and spirit, divine and mundane are rather thin. Generally speaking, they interact with one another as a complete whole. Thus there is a blurring of the line between the sacred and the profane. It is believed that one's sacred and secular life should be combined and not separated. In the absence of a written legal framework intended to protect the environment, African Traditional Religions play a major role in traditional African communities as a means of protecting and conserving the environment.

2 Methodological Perspectives

In this article I used qualitative research methods. The bulk of the content is based on library research that I carried out between June 2022 and February 2023 in libraries in Gaborone, Botswana. Books and journals were consulted. I also used internet sources to augment information collected from published and unpublished sources. Apart from using library and internet sources, I also used information that was based on empirical research that was carried out among the Chewa people in Southern Malawi in the mid-1980s and among various ethnics groups in Botswana between 1998 and the early 2000s by means of interviews, questionnaires and participant observation. In addition to this,

I used my personal lived experiences as an African brought up in a typical traditional African community. It should be noted that though I write as an insider, I have tried to be as objective as possible when discussing the phenomenon of the sacred as perceived in traditional African communities. The information is presented here descriptively in the form of narratives from different traditional African communities in various parts of the African continent. They are examples of the different approaches that traditional African communities use in their quest to protect and conserve the environment. I thus used a hybrid of methodological approaches of collecting and presenting data in order to enhance the reliability, credibility and validity of the argument developed in the article.

3 Theoretical Framework

This article uses Mircea Eliade's concept of the sacred as a theoretical framework to make a case for the unique approach by which African traditional societies protect and conserve the environment in Africa, by using their conceptions of the sacredness of nature. The choice of Eliade's theory of the sacred lies in the fact that, by and large, it is akin to the concept of the sacred as perceived in traditional societies in most parts of Africa. I argue in this article that some of the ideas that were developed by Eliade regarding the sacred can, to a certain extent, be used in the analysis of the concept of the sacred in many non-industrial, rural, traditional communities in Africa without any form of prejudice. It is this, among other things, that made me choose the Eliadean exposition of the sacred as a theoretical framework for this article.

4 Mircea Eliade's Concept of the Sacred

In his book *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, Eliade has expounded succinctly the phenomenon of the sacred. According to Eliade, the sacred is "the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural 'profane' world" (Eliade 1957, 11). Eliade has postulated that the sacred can, for example, be manifested in stones or trees. What is important to note is that such objects are not revered as they are but precisely because they are hierophanies, i.e. the manifestations or physical appearances of the sacred or the holy. In other words, the sacred or the holy shows itself in the object in which it is manifested. From the Eliadean perspective, by the sacred manifesting itself in a stone, tree or any other object, such an object becomes something else and yet it continues to be itself in the sense that it participates in its

surrounding cosmic milieu. For example, a sacred stone remains a stone from the profane point of view. In other words, though such a stone manifests the sacred, nothing distinguishes it from all other stones. Interestingly, for those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transformed into a supernatural reality (Eliade 1957, 12).

In his exposition of the sacred, Eliade has intimated that for those who have a religious experience all nature is capable of revealing itself as cosmic sacrality. The cosmos as a whole can become a hierophany or manifestation of the sacred (Eliade 1957, 12). What is significant to this article is Eliade's argument that traditional societies tend to view the sacred or hierophany as power and that in the final analysis such power is real. In his words, "the sacred is saturated with being. Sacred power means reality and at the same time enduringness and efficacity" (Eliade 1957, 12). According to Eliade, this way of perceiving the sacred is typical of traditional societies, whose tendency is to live as much as possible in the sacred or in close proximity to consecrated objects (Eliade 1957, 17). It is important to note that though the sacred is not coterminous with religion and the profane with the secular, it is largely true that religion is considered in many human societies and particularly in Africa as the domain of the sacred. The same holds true of spirituality and religion. Though the two are not the same and should not be confused, spiritually is closely associated with religion. It is uncommon in traditional African societies to find people talking about spirituality outside of religion. Religion and spirituality are enmeshed together. The religious person is at the same time a spiritual person since he or she is connected with the spiritual world.

As we shall see later, in African traditional societies there is a great deal of reverence to the sacred. Eliade's hypothesis that traditional societies are admittedly homo religious is in line with John Mbiti's assertion that "Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it" (Mbiti 1969, 1).

In his analysis of the sacred, Eliade has observed that "every sacred space implies an eruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different" (Eliade 1957, 26). As we shall see later in the discussion of the African approaches to the protection and conservation of the environment, this assertion is true in many ways. Africa is replete with sacred space and objects that are treated in many traditional African societies as qualitatively different and therefore sacred. In this regard, Eliade puts it succinctly thus:

> For religious man, nature is never only "natural"; it is always fraught with a religious value. This is easy to understand, for the cosmos is a divine

> creation; coming from the hands of the gods, the world is impregnated with sacredness … The gods did more; they manifested the different modalities of the sacred in the very structure of the world and of cosmic phenomena … The cosmos as a whole is an organism … it simultaneously reveals the modalities of being and sacrality. (Eliade 1957, 116)

It should be emphasised here that what is of primary significance and importance in regard to Eliade's analysis of hierophany, as expressed in traditional societies, is his assertion of the indissolubility of the sacred with the cosmic order. This is why his theory of the sacred is important in examining the different approaches to the protection and conservation of the environment in traditional African societies. Eliade puts it this way:

> We must not forget that for the religious man the supernatural is indissolubly connected with the natural, that nature always expresses something that transcends it … a sacred stone; it is venerated because it is sacred, not because it is a stone; it is the sacrality manifested through the mode of being of the stone that reveals its true essence … it is "supernature" that the religious man apprehends through the natural aspects of the world. (Eliade 1957, 118)

According to Eliade, for religious people, nature is never only natural but also religious. Religious people believe in the absolute reality of the sacred, which transcends this world but manifests itself in this world. They also believe that life has a sacred origin and that human existence realises all of its potentialities in proportion to its participation in the sacred reality (Eliade 1957, 202).

In agreement with Eliade's hypothesis, Gregg A. Okesson has argued that the sacred or spiritual presents one of the predominant ways many Africans think about their world. Traditional religions are, quite often, oriented towards the divine, or sacred, and permeate all facets of life. They focus on how the spiritual affects such mundane realities as agricultural cycles, birth, death and developments within the community (Okesson 2007, 40). In this regard, Okesson has noted that most people believe that religion is the domain of the sacred and where the numen, or supreme value, orients the rest of life (Okesson 2007, 42). In line with Okesson's observation, Ezenagu Ngozi has hypothesised that the sacred

> In most African communities … is the central foci of its traditional belief … Primarily sacredness proposes spirituality. The concept "sacred" manifests itself to man as an atmosphere of spiritual suspense. Such realm is

> most time attributed to certain space based on the cosmic knowledge of the presence of the divine. (Ngozi 2016, 2)

Ngozi has observed that one of the most important connections between African concepts of the sacred and Eliade's theory is his view that sacred space or object is an intersection where the three cosmic levels of the universe come into contact with one another and are represented (Ngozi 2016, 2). Eliade has noted that the sacred or hierophany is manifested in its deepest meaning at the point where the earth, heaven and the underworld meet. He names this the *axis mundi*, that is to say, the universal or cosmic pillar. According to Eliade, the whole of the habitable world extends from it. This generates the understanding that everything in the cosmos is inseparably connected and that the sacred takes precedence in traditional societies (Eliade 1957, 36–37). Ngozi has observed that this view projects precisely the African worldview of sacred place, which is believed to be the meeting place of the three levels of the cosmos, namely "the earth inhabited by human beings, the underworld by the ancestors and the world above by the Supreme God" (Ngozi 2016, 2). It is the interconnectedness of the cosmos as expounded in Eliade's theory that is at the centre of the spirituality and religious life of many traditional African societies on the continent. It is because of this, among other things, that I have chosen Eliade's concept of the sacred as a theoretical framework for the discussion and analysis of the African approaches to the protection and conservation of the environment.

5 African conceptions of the sacredness of nature

Jacob Olupona has noted that African Traditional Religions are religions that sprouted from the African soil before the coming of Christianity and Islam. They are indigenous to Africa. They have their own way of understanding sacredness and their own forms of spirituality. Olupona in his analysis of African spirituality has indicated that while binary conditions exist in the relationship between the sacred and the profane in other societies, in Africa this is not the case. There is no clear and fixed line of demarcation between the sacred and the profane. He writes:

> African spirituality simply acknowledges that beliefs and practices touch on and inform every facet of human life, and therefore African religion cannot be separated from the everyday mundane … It is a way of life and it cannot be separated from the public sphere. Religion informs everything in traditional African society including political art, marriage, health, diet, dress, economics and death. (Olupona 2015)

In many African societies, the sacred and the profane are not strictly divorced from one another. According to Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor, the concept of the sacred in African traditional societies stems from their perception of God and his role in creation. It is believed that since God is the Creator of the physical earth as we perceive it, the various aspects of the universe are permeated by the sense of the sacred. It is essentially a religious mindset that affects how African people view the world. The sacredness of nature is not imputed by human beings. It is intrinsic ontologically and derived from the Creator God (Odozor 2019). Kuzipa M. B. Nalwamba and Johan Buitendag have intimated that in the context of Africa, "human life is inseparably bound to nature in the same way that human beings are defined by their connection to the totality of the community of life" (Nalwamba and Buitendag 2017). According to Nalwamba and Buitendag, in the African context there is an inseparable nature of reality in the African notion and kinship of all creatures. There is emphasis on the bond and interconnectedness between people and the environment. There is a sense in which God is perceived as their Supreme Being whose life force is imbued in all creatures and that the vital force permeates and connects the interrelated web of dynamic and intricate relationships within the web of life (ibid.).

One of the most interesting aspects of the African concept of the sacred is that the notion of the "wholly other" seems somewhat absent. African spirituality is not "dualistic" or "binary". This is because the spirit world is in constant interaction with the physical world. It is strongly believed that the physical world has meaning in so far as it stands in cordial relationship with the spiritual world. The spiritual world and the physical world are not enemies but soulmates. They complement one another, with the spiritual world determining the affairs of human beings here on earth and shaping their destiny in the spirit world. African spirituality as well as the African conceptions of the sacred is integrative. They do not allow dichotomies. Secular and spiritual actions are two sides of the same coin. Thus politics, economics, the environment, social behaviour and the like are as spiritual as they are secular (Amanze 2006).

The sacredness of nature is upheld by most traditional African societies. What is more significant is that many African people see the natural world as having two dimensions – spiritual and physical. Matter has a spiritual dimension that connects human beings with the environment and whose preservation and protection amounts to the preservation and protection of the human beings themselves. The linkage between the social, environmental and spiritual realms is seen in the cultural ceremonies that are found in many traditional societies. Such ceremonies affirm human life, which is considered sacred (Mahohoma 2020).

One other very important element in African Traditional Religions, which is an authentic mark of African spirituality, is its emphasis on the community.

This is in line with the African people's philosophy of ubuntu, whose main tenet is "togetherness" or "bondness" or "cohesiveness". This is expressed in the maxim "I am because we are and I am human because I belong" (Mugumbate and Nyanguru 2013, 84). In Tswana society in Botswana this is expressed in the proverb "*motho ke motho ka batho*", which means "the worthiness of the individual is based on the worthiness of the community" (Amanze 2002b, 127). Community is defined in its totality as consisting of human beings and their milieu. Rupert Hambira has intimated that *botho* conveys shared values of morality, humanness, compassion, understanding, empathy, sharing, hospitality, honesty and humility. It is an ethic and a process of interaction that draws into a complete whole all people in society including their environment. According to Hambira, where there is *botho* human life is perceived as sacred, indispensable and irreplaceable in the totality of the community, which includes the environment in which they live (Hambira 2001, 2–4).

It can be seen from the above discussion that in African spirituality there is a great deal of emphasis on communal solidarity, which includes the environment. Nalwamba and Buitendag (2017) have postulated that in Africa the term "community" is inclusive in the sense that it includes all life: animals, the habitat, flora and everything else. The success of life is found in the ability to maintain a healthy relationship of all.

It is important to bear in mind that one of the strongest connections between nature and human beings in Africa are the totems. Emmanuel Abeku Essel has observed that taboos are a unique feature in African Traditional Religions. They convey elements of "sacredness", "being forbidden" and "dangerous" and are therefore to be treated with reverence and devotion. Taboos provide religious prohibitions instituted by society as instruments for moral motivation, guidance and objectivity in order to protect things that are considered sacred in society. Taboos are a kind of "social prohibition imposed by the leadership of a community regarding certain times, places, actions, events and people especially … for religious reasons and the well-being of the society" (Essel 2018).

In Africa, many societies have totems which represent their clan or tribe. In such societies there is an intimate connection between the totem and the animal, plant or any other natural element with a kinship group which it represents. The totem is generally associated with the ancestral roots of the clan or tribe. There are legends of clan or tribe origins which usually trace the relationship between the clan or tribe and their totem. Jean-Pierre Bah Kouakou has indicated that in the totemic system, the relationship between human beings and nature in traditional African societies enables one to highlight the sacredness of certain animal or plant species, in which case the totem is deified. He writes:

> The myths about these natural species justify, consolidate their sacred character, and strengthen proportionally their respect as a totem. Indeed an identity relationship is established between the taboo and the social group in such a way that the natural species is considered a member of the community. (Kouakou 2013)

According to Jean-Pierre, the totem has social, psychological and ritual underpinnings. From a social perspective, there is a connection and interrelatedness between the animal species, or vegetation or an inanimate object with a given group of the community. From a psychological perspective, there is a belief in a relationship of kinship or affiliation as between the members of the group and a given animal, plant or object. Finally, from a ritual perspective there is obedience to the totem in terms of taboos about the consumption or use of the natural item (Kouakou 2013).

John-Okoria Ibhakewanlan has indicated that the dominant presence of totems in many African societies is a reflection of the connection that exists between human beings and the natural phenomena. In many parts of Africa one finds totems either in the form of animals, plants or any other natural being which people believe to be ancestrally connected to their ethnic group, clan or family. The particular totem is seen as a tutelage spirit to which people attach deep feelings of respect and is part of their very existence. It is strictly forbidden to kill or destroy a totem. Members of a particular ethnic group would never kill or eat a totemic animal since it would be tantamount to eating themselves (Ibhakewanlan 2023).

It is important here to give some examples from Botswana, where the totemic system is quite dominant. Many of the tribal groups in Botswana have totems which give them their identity. For instance, the Bakwena tribe is identified with the crocodile (*kwena*), the Bangwato with duiker (*phuti*), the Bakgatla with the baboon (*kgabo*), the Bahurutshe with the eland (*phofhu*), the Bayeyi with reeds, the Karanga with the zebra and the Batlhaping with fish (*tlhapi*). Totems such as these are regarded as humans, thereby giving them the sacred nature of human beings. Such species, therefore, are preserved and protected. This connection establishes a sacred relationship between human beings and ecology. The taboos that govern their relationship ensure the preservation and protection of the ecosystem. Jean-Pierre Kouakou describes such a relationship in the following words:

> The taboos accompanying the sacred contribute to the conservation and protection of plant species, wildlife, fish species or natural elements considered sacred. In fact, in traditional African societies, the sacred has made it possible the protection of biodiversity through the sacred forests,

> sacred rocks, sacred animals or fish, which are closely linked to the socio-cultural lives of the people. Such objective of conservation and environmental protection is equally that of ecology. (Kouakou 2013)

The link noted above between human beings and the world of nature can only be understood in the context of the African peoples' concept of self, which stands in sharp contrast with the Western conceptions of the self. In this regard, Thaddeus Metz has observed as follows:

> In the Anglo-American, and more broadly Western, philosophical tradition, the self or person is usually identified with something internal, either a soul that contains mental states, a brain that contains mental states or, most common these days, a chain of mental states themselves, some of which are self-aware. It is not just philosophers who think of the self in this way, but Western people more generally, some evidence for which is the fact that such a conception of the self is dominant in the field of English-speaking psychology. (Metz 2019, 215)

Thaddeus has noted further, and I agree with him, that "the self" as typically constructed by African thinkers is, at least, substantially relational, largely constituted by interaction with other persons and the environment (Metz 2019, 219). In this vein, Chukwudumu B. Okolo in his article "Self as a Problem in African Philosophy" has indicated that in Africa the concept of "self" is relational and would lose its meaning if it wasn't. The essence of being a human being is authenticated by being in relationship with other beings such as animals, or inanimate forces around them. The "self" is defined and understood in relation to the community, which makes the individual self to the extent that without the community, the individual has no existence. Thus the "self" in African psychology and philosophical underpinnings is essentially social. According to Okolo, from an African perspective, the African is not just a being but a being-with-others. In the words of Okolo, "self" or "I" is defined in terms of "we-existence". Self in African philosophy is viewed from the "outside" in relation to others and not from "inside" in relation to self (Okolo 1998, 251–252).

6 African Approaches to the Conservation of the Environment: The Role of African Traditional Religions

This section of the article discusses African approaches to the protection and conservation of the environment with reference to the role played by African Traditional Religions focusing on the concept of the sacredness of nature,

which is pivotal in the African peoples' world view. Since space does not allow me to cover as many African countries as I wished, examples shall be drawn from a few selected countries in Africa to show how African traditional religious beliefs and practices are used to protect and preserve the environment.

It is important to point out that in Africa many indigenous communities have belief systems and practices that prevent people from degrading nature by imposing ethical injunctions in the form of taboos which, if broken, have immediate disastrous consequences. One of the most distinctive characteristics in the relationship between nature and human beings in most African societies is that of being "in communion" with nature and not dominating nature. In this regard, the aspect of being "in communion" with nature has ensured the preservation of landscapes such as forests and hills, as well as endangered animals, birds and other natural resources. Consequently, the continent of Africa was able to conserve vast natural resources from time immemorial until modern times, when we see a rapid destruction of the ecosystem through mining and other human activities in the name of modernity and development (Amanze 2016, 11).

Anthropological research both past and present testifies to the fact that Africans are environmentally friendly. In Africa, land and its environs are considered precious gifts God gave to humankind because people are born in it, live on it, and are buried in the bosom of Mother Earth. Jean-Pierre Bah Kouakou, writing in the context of the Ivory Coast, has documented that land and water are regarded sacred cosmic elements. This is particularly the case in the Baoule community. Among the Baoule, land is seen as a divinity and represented by a stone or a tree capable of hosting spirits and usually placed in the centre of the village or in the middle of the family yard. Such representations embody the spirit of a genius called *assie oussou*, meaning the genius of the land. It is considered the landowner that provides or stops rain and provides a good harvest but also the one who protects the community against evil attacks of spiritual and physical nature. In order to protect the land, there are days when no activities are permitted to be carried out on the land. This is reinforced by taboos which, if disregarded, can bring automatic punishment on the transgressors. Other activities such as sexual encounters are not allowed and if culprits are caught copulating, purifications of the land have to be performed in order to avert dangers such as temporary cessation of the rains (Jean-Pierre 2013).

In the same vein, among the coastal peoples of the Ivory Coast, the fishing period (May to October) is initiated by an opening rite over Aby Lagoon. The priest of the spirit called Assohon opens the fishing in May and closes it in October. Sacred catfish of Sapia are sheltered in the Drasi River, which is formally forbidden to fish in. During the day it is forbidden to go to Yonyongo River because it is dedicated to venerated crocodiles (Oviedo et al. 2005).

Among the Chewa people in Malawi, among whom I carried out intensive and extensive research, land is also considered sacrosanct. In traditional Chewa communities land does not belong to an individual but to the community to be used by the living and those yet to be born. The ancestors are considered the guardians of the land. Traditionally, land is not supposed to be sold or bought, though now things have changed dramatically because of modernity (Amanze 2002a). Apart from land, the Chewa people in Southern Malawi consider certain forests as sacred and therefore protected from desecration and destruction. In such forests people are not allowed to cut trees for firewood, cut grass, hunt animals and birds or copulate, because such activities would anger the ancestors who are the guardians of the land – something that would lead to drought, and therefore famine. These forests include Mponda and Kalembo forests near Ulongwe in Machinga District. These sacred forests are used as alters where the elders pour libations in order to avert drought, which is quite often considered punishment from God as a result of breaking taboos of the land (Amanze 2002a).

Another example of how African Traditional Religions are used as a means of protecting and preserving the environment can be drawn from Guinea in West Africa. It is reported that among the indigenous people in Guinea traditional religious beliefs are deeply embedded in everyday village life. Among the people living in the area, several lakes are sacred to local communities and strict taboos and local rules shape the use of wetland resources. It is held, for instance, that at Lake Wassaya it is forbidden to hunt and there is a very short fishing season, and even the crocodiles are considered sacred. People who intend to fish in the lake must first obtain permission from a group of village elders. Traditional beliefs protecting the sacredness of nature persist to the present day. This assists in the preservation and maintenance of the integrity of the wetland (Oviedo et al. 2005, 10).

The Maasai of Kenya also provide a good example of how African Traditional Religions protect and preserve the environment. For example, recent studies have found that the Naimina Enkiyio indigenous forests are considered sacred by the Maasai. The indigenous people living in the area consider the forests as the centre of their lives. They guarantee their survival, their spiritual life, their past and their future. To them the forest is the holy temple of their people, a sacred place where prophets bring offerings to *Enkai*, the Maasai Supreme Being. In this regard, there are many religious ceremonies which are performed within or at the edges of the sacred forests. It is custom to hold within the sacred forests initiation rites that mark the beginning of a new age group that turns boys into young adults ready to assume new responsibilities in society. Other rites performed in the sacred forests include those that are intended to bless and cleanse Maasai women in order to enhance their fertility (Oviedo et al. 2005, 10).

In Ghana there are also certain forests that are considered sacred. For instance, in the village of Nanhini, no villager is allowed to enter the forest of the goddess Numafoa or ignore its taboos. There are sacred forests where entry is strictly forbidden, while in others people may be allowed to collect some traditional medicines and other specified products but they cannot use them for farming or hunting (Oviedo et al. 2005, 10).

In Botswana great respect for the environment is also shared by a number of ethnic groups. The chiefs, as custodians of the environment, represent the will of the ancestors and their word is *de facto* and *de jure* law. For example, among the Bamalete, Bakgatla, Bakwena and Bangwato there are certain trees that are not supposed to be cut during the rainy season because they are considered to be female trees and therefore associated with the fertility of the land. Such trees are protected by taboos based on the belief that cutting such trees can bring a bad omen to the harvest. It is believed that the cutting of such trees can cause hailstones, thunder, lightning and very strong wind that can destroy houses and crops and cause injury and death to people (Amanze 2002b, 305).

Again there are certain animals that are considered sacred and therefore cannot be killed indiscriminately. Such animals include the giraffe, the buffalo, the python, the eland and the gemsbok to name just a few. It is held that the main purpose of this prohibition is to protect these animals from extinction. The animals and birds that are not supposed to be killed are protected by the chiefs. There is also a belief that if killed they can bring illness and death (Amanze 2002b, 310). Among the Bamalete people there is a belief that in order for the land to be useful to human beings, it must remain constantly in the state of coolness, that is, undefiled by human beings. This generates good health, material prosperity, harmony, peace, social order, spiritual blessedness and – most importantly of all – rain (Amanze 2002b, 303).

It is strongly believed among the Bamalete that the inhabited world is God's creation and that it has been given to human beings as a free gift. In this regard, human beings do not possess the land as their own personal property to be used at will but act as trustees (Amanze 2002b, 303). Thus in traditional societies the environment is protected by unwritten laws which are based on the beliefs and practices of traditional religions and not on rules enforced by the police or the courts.

One of the indigenous groups in Botswana which has a unique relationship with the land and indeed the environment in which they live is the Basarwa. They live in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. They consist of different ethnic entities but they have one thing in common: they consider the whole of their habitat sacred. They are hunters and gatherers. It is held that they have lived in Southern Africa for more than 2,500 years, and considered the first people in the region (Batboy 2005). Basarwa claim that they are by nature religious

and that their religiosity goes back to the time immemorial. It is as old as the Basarwa themselves. The religious life of Basarwa is grounded in their belief in God, the ancestors, traditional healers and a variety of other traditional beliefs and practices as informed by nature. During my field work in Maun, I was informed by my respondents that the Basarwa believe in a Supreme Being variously known as *Khane, Hiiseba, N!adiba, N!adisa*.

Basarwa believe that God gives his people all they need such as land, animals, food, water, good health, good luck, children and a host of other things. They informed me that they derive their knowledge regarding all these things from the environment around them, which is the manifestation of God's presence. Therefore, Basarwa consider the Central Kalagari Game Reserve sacred by nature. It is the hallmark of their being and the core of their existence. The game reserve links together the ancestors, the living, those yet to be born and ultimately links to God. In this context, Basarwa conceive the Kalagari region not only as their physical home but also their spiritual habitat. After all, their ancestors are buried there. Thus the Basarwa live their lives in oneness with nature and sharing the same life spirit with animals and plants. To them the land and the environment around them represent total humanity. Therefore, they live in a symbiotic relationship with nature. They preserve and protect the environment around them. They take from it not more than what they need. They live in "communion" with nature. They do not "dominate" and destroy nature because it is sacred and the core of their very existence (Amanze 2007, 99–115).

Among the Shona of Zimbabwe there are also certain animals that are recognised as sacred either by virtue of their nature or because they have been dedicated to ancestral spirits. Such animals include the hippo, water python, fish eagle, antelope, lion, elephant and buffalo. These animals are associated with the founding of a clan. In this regard, members of the clan are forbidden from eating the animal associated with its founding ancestry. One is expected to show reverence to the totemic animal by bowing down to the ground. The clan may ask the totemic animal for favours and protection. The totemic animal may be praised and asked to shower blessings upon the clan. This attitude leads to the conservation of the totemic animals. Again among the Shona there are natural phenomena which are linked to a clan, chieftaincy or ethnic group or ancestors. Certain hills, mountains, forests and trees are deemed sacred because that is where the chief's ancestral spirits were buried. Due to their sacredness when a person wants to go to a place which is known to be sacred he or she is required to get permission from the local chief. Sacred forests and trees are protected by traditional leaders from domestic consumption and utilisation. People are forbidden from cutting down sacred trees for firewood (Mahohoma 2020). Again, among the Shona certain pools, rivers and waterfalls are considered sacred because they are associated with water spirits

which the Shona believe are endowed with healing powers (ibid.). Michael Gelfand in *Shona Religion* has noted that among the Shona of Zimbabwe water is associated with life. The production and germination of seeds depend on water. Water purifies, restores, cleanses and regenerates. Water is the universal mother, the essence and soul of life. Among the Shona the pool represents a sacred place for tribal spirits and deities (Gelfand 1962).

7 Secularisation in Africa as a Gateway to Environmental Degradation

As I come to the end of this article, it is important to point out that it would be fallacious to assume that the concept of the sacred in Africa has remained the same over the years. In modern times it has changed considerably as a result of secularisation. In this article secularisation refers to a process whereby the world loses its sacred character and human beings put a great deal of emphasis on material things such as money and the like. In this process the supernatural plays no part, leading, ultimately, to the abandonment of traditional religious values and practices (Hamilton 1995). In Africa many traditional communities are undergoing a process of secularisation in the sense defined above. As a result, we see a process of desacralisation involving the transformation of knowledge, behaviour and institutions that were once thought to be grounded in divine power into phenomena of purely human creation (Hamilton 1995). The implication of this in traditional African societies is that the environment is gradually losing its sacred nature, leading to environmental degradation.

In this section of the article it will be argued that the hierophany's loss of divine power in many parts of African communities has led to an enormous environmental crisis that we witness today in practically all African countries, even in communities where African Traditional Religions hold sway. Recent research by various scholars and government officials has revealed that the environmental crisis in Africa is a matter of serious concern. Such an environmental crisis is a result of mining, the dumping of industrial waste into rivers, lakes and oceans, deforestation, soil erosion, overgrazing, overfishing, the depletion of dense forests, poaching and the destruction of beautiful features of the environment. In all the instances mentioned above, greed, economic profit, poverty, uncontrolled activities of mining companies, disregard of tribal authorities, secularisation and climate change – to name but a few causes – are to blame.

The demise of the power of the sacred in Africa is attributed to a number of factors that are worth mentioning here. In the first instance, according to Jean-Pierre, the impact of climate change on ecosystems and their biodiversity threatens the sacred owing to the close relationship between the sacred and nature. This is because there is a symbiotic relationship between the sacred

and nature. Since the hierophany manifests itself in nature, it means that without nature, there is no sacred and without the sacred some natural elements would not come into being. In Africa long dry seasons caused by global warming seriously affects the environment (Kouakou 2013).

In addition to this, the modernising process of traditional societies is taking place in many countries in Africa. Many societies in Africa are gradually becoming secular, that is to say, religion and spirituality are no longer having a strong grip in the life of individuals and communities. This desacralisation of African communities is attributed to Western forms of education, new forms of political governance which no longer depend on the political authority of village chiefs but on the principles of democracy exercised by central and local governments, the introduction of new forms of economy based on the monetisation of material resources and globalisation. These social, political and economic forces have unleashed tremendous changes on the African peoples' concept of the sacred. Jean-Pierre Kouakou has observed that the modernisation of traditional African societies has given rise to an acculturation of the rural youth that has consequently led to an objection to the value of the sacred or the desecration of the sacred. This has led to the point where some natural sacred places and species have become objects of tourism (Kouakou 2013).

Finally, the introduction of Christianity in many traditional African societies has led to unprecedented changes on matters of religious belief, spirituality, ethics and religious practices. From the time of its inception in Africa to the present day, Christianity has advocated the eradication of African Traditional Religions, which are considered evil and therefore not a feasible path to salvation. Christianity's radical message of conversion from the old to the new forms of religious orientation have led to the loss of the sacred value that traditional African societies attach to particular places, objects and species in many traditional African societies (Kouakou 2013). It should be noted that Christianity's teaching with its emphasis on "dominating" rather than "being in communion" with nature has led to the wanton destruction of the environment since it has been put to humanity's use rather than protected (Amanze 2016). All in all, this accounts for the disregard for the need to protect and conserve the environment in many traditional African communities today.

8 Conclusion

This article discussed the role of African Traditional Religions in the protection and conservation of the environment. In order to do this, it used Mircea Eliade's concept of the sacred, which is akin to African conceptions of sacredness. The

African conception of the sacred stands in sharp contrast with the Western psychological perspectives of the sacred and the profane. The article argued that the central element that enables African Traditional Religions to work as a tool for the protection and conservation of the environment is its perception of nature as holistically sacred. The sacredness of nature embraces the social, spiritual and physical elements of the cosmos. The sacred or the hierophany is the *axis mundi*. It is the meeting place of the heavens, the earth and the underworld. The article argued that the sacredness of the cosmos is interconnected socially, spiritually and environmentally. This ensures the preservation of the flora and fauna of many traditional African communities. Unfortunately, African Traditional Religions are failing to protect and preserve the environment today. This failure is attributed mainly to climate change, the uncontrolled quest for development as perceived by the industrialised Western nations, Western forms of education, and the teachings of Christianity. The latter describes African traditional religious beliefs, spirituality, practices and ethics as superstition and evil. They do not lead to eternal salvation therefore they should be eradicated. This has led to the desacralisation of many sacred places, flora, fauna and the like and ultimately to the wanton destruction of the environment that we see in Africa today.

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Religion, Ecology and Hindu Nationalism in India

Research Article

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Abstract

In this paper I examine the construction of Hinduism as inherently "environmentally friendly" within religions and ecology discourses and how this construction has been appropriated by the Hindu nationalist movement in India to serve ends that are at odds with the pursuit of sustainable development. I begin by tracing the emergence of religions and ecology discourses and the assertion that Asian or Eastern religions are inherently environmentally friendly. This is followed by critiques of this neo-traditionalist approach for being anachronistic and essentialist, as well as for promoting a "myth of primitive ecological wisdom" that can have damaging effects on communities who live close to nature. This is because it reduces them to idealisations to serve other ends and has little impact on effecting policies that can improve their lives as well as addressing anthropogenic climate change. Next, I consider the construction of Hinduism as environmentally friendly within the context of the ascendency of Hindu nationalism. I examine the ways in which the claim to support sustainable development, alongside invoking neo-traditionalist religions and ecology discourse, is at odds with the actual policies pursued by Hindu nationalists, whose Bharatiya Janata Party has been in power since 2014. I will demonstrate that in its bid to spread a particular version of Hinduism across India alongside the growth of the market economy, some traditional livelihoods that are more sustainable than modern alternatives, such as nomadic pastoralism or Adivasi (tribal) economies, and the religio-cultural traditions that surround them, are being undermined and threatened with extinction.

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Keywords

religion – ecology – environmentalism – Hinduism – Hindu nationalism – neo-traditionalist

1 Introduction

My aim in this paper is to examine the construction of Hinduism as inherently "environmentally friendly" within religions and ecology discourses and how this has been appropriated by the Hindu nationalist movement in India to serve ends that are at odds with the pursuit of sustainable development. Since the late 1960s religious traditions have responded to the increasing awareness that human interaction with the natural world has consequences that are damaging to other species as well as to human development and security, coinciding with the emergence of environmental movements across the globe (White 1967). What was not known at that time was that this was leading to anthropogenic climate change and that the need for action would become ever more pressing and urgent over the coming decades. As a reflection of the emergent awareness that humans needed to change their values and behaviours with respect to nature, religious traditions became drawn into moral debates and calls for practical action, and a field of "religions and ecology" arose (Jenkins et al. 2017). This involved religious practitioners, activists and scholars seeking to examine the ways in which religious teachings and traditions could be directed towards establishing a moral framing for environmental action as well as imperatives for their followers to change their behaviour.

A dominant theme within religions and ecology discourses is the claim that religious traditions are *inherently* environmentally friendly and that while communities in the past used to follow the injunctions of their traditions to treat nature with respect – as evidenced by the existence of small-scale and sustainable livelihoods – processes of colonialism and industrialisation have severed their sacred link with the natural world (Tomalin 2009). This results in a romantic longing for an imagined pre-colonial and pre-industrial past that needs to be revived to address the current crisis facing humanity. Many commentators on religions and ecology are sensitive to the fact that the environmental crisis is a modern concern and that even where religious teachings can be interpreted to support care for nature or where nature is a prominent feature of religious practice, this is not evidence of an inherent environmental ethic that has been lost and can be revived. However, I am interested here in examining the *neo-traditionalist* strand of religions and ecology discourses

as having distinctive parallels with the strategies of right-wing populist and nationalist politics that are gaining ascendancy on the global stage.

To illustrate this, I focus upon the construction of Hinduism as an environmentally friendly religion and argue that this cannot be considered in isolation from the Hindu nationalist context within which this view of ecological Hinduism has taken shape. On the one hand, I will demonstrate how Hinduism has been constructed by neo-traditionalist religions and ecology discourse as an environmentally friendly religion, where neo-traditionalism refers to "the deliberate revival and revamping of old cultures, practices, and institutions for use in new political contexts and strategies" (Galvan 2007: 399), while at the same time ignoring the fact that the past is being selectively appropriated. On the other hand, I will argue that this process of "greening" Hinduism has developed alongside the strengthening of Hindu nationalist politics in India that enthusiastically embraces the view of Hinduism as environmentally friendly as a right-wing nationalist strategy to elevate the Hindu religion and to marginalise non-Hindus in a bid to establish a Hindu nation. I will argue that the Hindu nationalist engagement with the discourse that Hinduism is environmentally friendly bolsters the view that Hinduism trumps and opposes forms of colonialism that brought ostensibly "foreign" religions such as Islam and Christianity to India and that these have played a role in upsetting the harmonious relations – ecological, social and political – that otherwise would have prevailed, rather than demonstrating a firm commitment to developing and protecting sustainable livelihoods that will lead to better development outcomes.

The portrayal of Hinduism as environmentally friendly refers here to a number of dimensions that manifest in the writings and speeches of different commentators. This includes the idea that elements of the natural world are viewed as divine (e.g. forests and rivers), that the Earth is identical to the mother goddess and that this has meant that Hindus have worshiped and revered nature in ways that have led them to treat the natural environment with respect (Apffel-Marglin and Mishra 1993; Apffel-Marglin and Prajuli 2000; Banwari 1992; Chapple and Tucker 2000). Importantly, these dimensions are depicted as integral to the Hindu tradition and any attempt to interfere with them is an assault on the natural world, on Hinduism and on the integrity of the Hindu nation. While sharing with religions and ecology activists the ambition to establish the ecological credentials of the Hindu tradition, the Hindu nationalist promotion of Hinduism as environmentally friendly uses this as part of a repertoire of neo-traditionalist strategies that selectively reach into the past to argue that Hinduism is the "authentic" Indian religion, with care for nature being one of its key credentials, but without evidence that supporters of Hindu nationalism are genuinely concerned about issues around sustainability.

The current Indian government, which is led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, claims to have the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including those that have an environmental focus, at the heart of its development and economic policies, and indeed its embrace of religions and ecology discourse might seem to support this. Moreover, the BJP's stated commitment to inclusive development, articulated through its powerful slogan following its landslide 2014 election success – *Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas* (together with all, development for all) – would further seem to support the SDG pledge to address extreme inequality (Haustein and Tomalin 2021; Jaffrelot 2021; Malhotra 2020). However, its commitment to sustainable development is weak (Chandra 2021) and, as I will demonstrate, its bid to spread Hindu nationalist ideology across India, alongside the growth of the market economy (Chacko 2019), is leading to increased social and religious inequality. Some traditional livelihoods that are more sustainable than modern alternatives, such as nomadic pastoralism (Sharma et al. 2003; Dyer 2014) or Adivasi (tribal) economies (Baviskar 2005; Kumar and Puthumattathil 2018), and the religio-cultural traditions that surround them, are being undermined and irreversibly threatened with extinction.

In the first section I will examine the emergence of religions and ecology discourses and the assertion within those that Asian or Eastern religions are inherently environmentally friendly. This will be followed by critiques of this neo-traditionalist approach for being anachronistic and essentialist, as well as for promoting a "myth of primitive ecological wisdom" (Milton 1993, 1996) that can have damaging effects on communities who live close to nature as it reduces them to idealisations to serve other ends and has little impact on effecting policies that can improve their lives as well as addressing anthropogenic climate change. In the second section I then turn to consider the construction of Hinduism as environmentally friendly within the context of the ascendency of Hindu nationalism. I consider the ways in which the claims to support sustainable development, alongside invoking religions and ecology discourses, is at odds with the actual policies pursued by Hindu nationalists whose BJP party has been in power since 2014.

2 The Emergence and Critique of Neo-traditionalist Religions and Ecology Discourse

2.1 *The Origins of Religions and Ecology Discourses*

The publication of Lynn White's famous article – *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis* – in the journal *Science* in 1967 marks the beginning of religions

and ecology discourse. Against the backdrop of growing concerns about the negative human impact on ecological systems and the beginnings of an environmental movement in North America following the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 – which brought to the attention of the American public the devastating effects of pesticides upon the countryside and the food chain – White was one of the first to put down on paper the argument that how humans treat the natural world has a link to their religious and cultural traditions (1967). He argued that Christianity had played a role in establishing the conditions for human exploitation of nature that led to the industrial revolution of the 18th century, where it teaches that

> Man shares, in great measure, God's transcendence of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions …, not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends (1967: 1205).

As we see, by contrast, "Asia's religions", as described by White (1967), are posited as capable of providing a solution to the environmental crisis, by virtue of their apparent non-dualism. While I problematise such an essentialist understanding of Asian religions' non-dualism as inherently lending itself to a practical ecological ethic, this valorisation of South Asian religions, such as Hinduism, as naturally supporting such an ethical framework, has been a key feature of neo-traditionalist religions and ecology discourse. As White (1967) argued, whereas Christianity has tended to create dualisms between nature and humanity, and humanity and the divine, establishing damaging hierarchies that, it is argued, have led humans to exploit nature for their own ends, Eastern traditions, such as Buddhism, and indeed Hinduism, are depicted as promoting the view that humans are interconnected with nature and the divine and that this encourages people to treat the natural world with respect, limiting their interference with it. The wider literature on religions/Hinduism and ecology laments the loss of this ethical relationship with nature, under the impact of forces of colonialism, industrialisation and secularisation, and urges that there may still be opportunities to encourage people to re-establish their sacred links to nature as a response to the climate crisis or that policies need to be designed to support communities where such a link has not been completely severed to continue with livelihoods that are more sustainable than many modern alternatives (e.g. livelihoods of tribal or pastoralist groups) (see for instance Apffel-Marglin and Mishra 1993; Apffel-Marglin and Prajuli 2000; Banwari 1992; Chapple and Tucker 2000). The undermining of indigenous and non-Christian traditions in many parts of the globe through missionary

activity during colonial periods is often considered to have resulted in the replacement of traditions that support people to live more harmoniously with nature by Christian traditions that do not have this at their core (Devy and Davis 2021). While this critique of Christianity resonates with White's argument outlined above, he also attempts to retrieve Christianity's ecological credentials through promoting a "stewardship" ethic, drawing on the example of St Francis of Assisi who "tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God's creatures" (1967: 1206).

2.2 *The "Greening of Religion" and the "World Religions Paradigm": The Implications for Hinduism and Ecology*

This linking of the so-called "world religions" with intentional care for the natural environment, based on an awareness that human interference with nature has led to devastating ecological consequences, has been variously called the "greening of religion" or "religious environmentalism". I argue that this is a modern response to the environmental or climate crisis, rather than a straightforward revival of pre-existing environmentally friendly religions. Rather, religious teachings have been reinterpreted, extended or synthesised in order to express concern for the environment, old rituals have been given new significance and new rituals have been devised to reinforce the idea that there is a need for a re-evaluation of humanity's relationship to the natural world. While religions and ecology discourses do step outside of what has been called the "world religions paradigm", in their engagement with traditional or indigenous forms of spiritual expressions, the world religions dominate their manifestations, and this has important implications for my interest here in Hinduism and ecology. The world religions paradigm refers to the way in which the colonial encounter with non-Christian religions by the nineteenth century had led to a conceptualisation of these foreign religious manifestations as discrete religious traditions differentiated from each other by beliefs, doctrines and teachings, laid out in religious texts and led by acknowledged authority figures (Masuzawa 2005). As such, scholars have argued that the idea of Hinduism as a world religion only took shape during the British colonial period where the term was used to impose a unity onto a diverse range of religio-cultural practices of the groups of people known as Hindus, previously viewed as a distinct community group rather than a group identified by their sharing of a unified religious tradition (Killingley 1993; King 1999; Lorenzen 1999). Critics suggest that this has meant that non-Christian religious systems have been henceforth reshaped in the global imagination to resemble the framework of Protestant Christianity, which has led to various distorting processes including an assumption that religious texts are primary, that there is a unity to the systems that have been classified as a "world religion", thereby marginalising

elements that come to be viewed an inauthentic, and that religious traditions have distinct boundaries with people only able to 'belong' to one tradition. Another important influence on the construction of world religions in Asia was the growing interest from European orientalist scholars who sought to systematically study Indian religions, emphasising a philological and philosophical approach to Hindu texts (establishing an elite or "authentic" Hinduism) over a more community-centred approach to practice and ritual at the village level (i.e. an ethnographic account of what people actually did or "lived religion") (King 1999: 155). These different aspects – the singular affiliation, the creation of discrete traditions and the recourse to Sanskrit or Brahmanical texts – are all relevant for understanding the contemporary significance of Hinduism and ecology discourse for the contemporary Hindu nationalist state.

A reflection of the dominance of the world religions paradigm in religions and ecology discourses can be seen in the so-called Assisi Declarations. These represent the first global and interfaith attempt to publicly promote the ecological ethics of the world religions and were presented at an event held in Assisi, Italy, in 1986, no doubt a homage to White's invocation of St Francis in his influential article. Representatives of five of the world's major religions (Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism and Judaism) met to make statements concerning the environmental nature of their religious traditions. This meeting was jointly organised by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the International Consultancy on Religion, Education and Culture (ICOREC),, We can see clearly across all the declarations an articulation of neo-traditional religions and ecology discourse, where an imagined past is invoked where people treated their natural environment with respect because of their religious teachings but that this has been lost and needs to be revived to re-establish ecological harmony. For example, as the Hindu declaration given by Dr Karan Singh, President of the Hindu Virat Samaj, an organisation with links to Hindu nationalism, reads (Mitra 1981):

> In the ancient spiritual traditions, man was looked upon as a part of nature, linked by indissoluble spiritual and psychological bonds with the elements around him. This is very much marked in the Hindu tradition, probably the oldest living religious tradition in the world … [T]he natural environment also received the close attention of the ancient Hindu scriptures. Forests and groves were considered as sacred, and flowering trees received special reverence … The Hindu tradition of reverence for nature and all forms of life, vegetable or animal, represents a powerful tradition which needs to be re-nurtured and re-applied in our contemporary context (WWF 1986: 17–19).

This excerpt takes the concept of Hinduism, constructed as a unified "world religion", and further invents it as environmentally friendly. As I demonstrate in the next section, both of these processes underpin strategies used by contemporary Hindu nationalists to bolster their exclusivist and populist politics. This not only marginalises religious minorities, such as Christians and Muslims, but also those Hindus, such as some groups of nomadic pastoralists and Adivasis, whose religiosity is not aligned with the Hindu nationalist vision, yet exists alongside livelihoods that are more sustainable than the modern market-led alternatives promoted by the BJP government.

2.3 *Key Features and Critiques of Hinduism and Ecology Discourse: Anachronism, Essentialism and the "Myth of Primitive Ecological Wisdom"*

Amongst the topics that have been covered in the Hinduism and ecology literature, a focus on sacred forests and groves is prominent. Much of this literature is concerned with the argument that patches of forest have traditionally been preserved due to the existence of an attitude of environmental conservation inspired by religious belief. Indeed, to this day one can find patches of forest all over India that have been protected due to religious custom. In comparison to surrounding agricultural land, these refugia are described as "hotspots of biodiversity", both in terms of the age and range of species, and are claimed to be of ecological significance to the locality in providing watershed functions or, in the case of larger groves, helping to regulate the climate (Ram Manohar, 1997). Thus, whilst communities farmed the surrounding land for their daily needs, the groves themselves are depicted as having remained more or less untouched, where "the removal of even a small twig is taboo" (Gadgil and Vartak, 1981: 273, 1974).

Other commentators have, however, been critical of this approach to making a direct link between religiously inspired environmental ethics and the protection of sacred groves, arguing that this amounts to "anachronistic projections of modern phenomena onto the screen of tradition" (Pederson 1995: 264; Tomalin 2004). For instance, Freeman argues, in response to the idea that the protection of the biodiversity within sacred groves in India is evidence of environmentalism, that "cultural values are being imputed to populations not on the evidence of their actually espousing and expressing those values, but on the basis of inferring that they must hold some such values and beliefs from the requirements of the analyst's own ecological model" (1994: 7–8). He argues that although there is a strong tradition of sacred grove preservation in India, it can be suggested that people worship these forests because they are the abode of the deity rather than to conserve biodiversity (Freeman 2004). Elements of the natural world may be considered

as sacred without any explicit consciousness about the relevance of this to broader environmental protection.

Similar neo-traditional and anachronistic tendencies are seen with respect to arguments about how the worship of India's rivers, typically considered to be goddesses, is evidence of an ecological ethic. The most significant river in India, both materially and spiritually, is the Ganges. It is around 2,500 km long, flowing through the western Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal, and also into Bangladesh. Its flood-prone basin is one of the most densely populated in the world, home to some of the poorest of the global population. The Ganges is deeply ingrained in the religio-cultural practices of the region. Hindus consider the river to be an embodiment of the goddess Ganga Ma, places along the river attract pilgrims who come to bathe in her purifying waters, and to be cremated on the banks of the Ganges in Varanasi is to be assured entry into heaven (Eck 1985). However, like Freeman's observation about the worship of sacred groves, Alley has argued against the idea that the worship of the Ganges is evidence of an ecological ethic and draws attention to the apparent paradox between the veneration of the Ganges as a goddess and its severe pollution with material waste (1998; 2000). She demonstrates that although the priests who perform rituals on the banks of the Ganges in the holy city of Varanasi are concerned about the purity of the river, this is with respect to ritual purity and not material purity. Their aim is to keep Ganga Ma happy through the performance of *arati* and *puja* so that she will continue to purify the cosmos, soul, body and heart, thereby avoiding the complete collapse of the current moral order (1998: 311). Alley suggests that the separation of ideas of ritual purity (*shuddha* or *pavitra*) from physical pollution (*gandagi*) means that people tend not to be as bothered about projects to clean the Ganges as one might hope. While people in India worship the dangerously polluted Ganges as the goddess Ganga Ma, there is little evidence that this religious practice motivates devotees to engage in initiatives to prevent any further pollution of the river (Alley 1998, 2000, 2002).

In addition to being neo-traditionalist and anachronistic, claims about Hinduism as inherently environmentally friendly are also essentialist, selectively filtering out aspects of the Hindu tradition that would not meet environmentalist credentials. For instance, Nelson is concerned that the frequent disregard for the material world in Hinduism, as an impediment to spiritual progress, despite its emphasis on non-duality, is problematic for claims that the tradition is environmentally friendly. He questions the sentiments towards nature that a passage such as the following might suggest: would this inspire the devotee to revere nature as part of a spiritual life, or "would it rather teach … the irrelevance of nature to spiritual life?" (1998: 81).

> Pure non-attachment is disregard for all objects – from the god Brahma down to plants and minerals – like the indifference one has toward the excrement of a crow (from the *Aparokshanubhuti*, a text associated with the 8th century Indian philosopher Shankara; cited in Nelson 1998: 81).

These critiques of Hinduism and ecology discourse for being anachronistic and essentialist underpin what Kay Milton has called the "myth of primitive ecological wisdom" (1996), which essentialises the values and lifestyles of non-industrial communities as environmentally friendly. Neo-traditionalist religions and ecology discourse is ideally suited to supporting this myth when it asserts that religious traditions are inherently environmentally friendly and communities in the past that practised sustainable livelihoods did so due to the contribution of their religious traditions that provided ethical frameworks to guide their behaviour and/or sanctions if they exploited natural resources beyond certain limits. In the next section, I suggest that the myth of primitive ecological wisdom, and the tools of anachronism and essentialism that are mobilised at its service, are not just problematic because they make false claims about communities in the past, but can have damaging effects on communities who live close to nature today as it reduces them to idealisations to serve other ends and has little impact on effecting policies that can improve their lives as well as on addressing anthropogenic climate change. The idealisation of such communities becomes a proxy that deflects attention away from policies and actions that are at odds with the values apparently being promoted. At the same time, communities with livelihoods that are more sustainable than many modern alternatives (e.g. pastoralist and Adivasi) are under threat alongside their religio-cultural traditions, despite the fact that these share features with aspects of Hinduism and ecology discourse, including the sacralisation of nature and the protection of trees and forests.

3 Hindu Nationalism and Religions and Ecology

3.1 *The Origins of Hindu Nationalism*

In symbiosis with the construction of Hinduism as a world religion during the colonial period, Hindu nationalism emerged as a response to the British presence. Hence, an impact of the emergence of strong religious identities in India during the colonial period also played into the burgeoning nationalist movement as groups agitated for freedom from British rule, and one way that communities organised themselves was according to religious tradition (Jaffrelot 1996; Thapar 2016). This was true for Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities, all of which saw reform movements emerge alongside, and sometimes

intertwining with, nationalist groups that sought self-determination once independence was achieved, including campaigning for separate states that reflected religious identity. Today Hinduism is a label for a world religion but at the same time a political religious and nationalist category that is the underpinning ideology of the current BJP government.

The earliest antecedent of Hindu nationalist politics is the Hindu Mahasabha, established in 1915, to protect Hindu interests against the British colonialists and Indian Muslims, who had set up the Muslim League in 1906. It became a political party in the late 1930s, under Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. While in prison in the early 1920s, he wrote *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* (1928), an extremely influential text that has come to shape modern Hindu nationalism (Khan et al. 2017). An atheist himself, Savarkar "argued that religion was only one aspect of Hindu identity, and not even the most important" (Jaffrelot 2007: 15). He viewed the Hindu people not just in terms of "religious faith and practice" but also as "a homogenous cultural entity" (Khan et al. 2017: 488). While Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains were also viewed as Hindus by virtue of their shared Indic origins, Muslims and Christians were viewed as outside the Hindu nation, and Savarkar drew attention to "periods of Islamic conquest and British colonialism as having suppressed Hindu nationhood" (2017: 494) to justify this stance. Savarkar considered that "Muslims and Christians no longer could be considered to be Hindus because of their adoption of religious faiths foreign to the Indian subcontinent" (2017: 495) but that "the religious minorities are outsiders who must adhere to Hindutva culture, which is the national culture. In the private sphere they may worship their gods and follow their rituals, but in the public domain they must pay allegiance to Hindu symbols" (Jaffrelot 2007: 15). In the mid-1920s, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteers Association; RSS) was set up by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar. This was an organisation that "decided to work at the grass roots in order to reform Hindu society from below", formally remaining out of politics (2007: 16). Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, who was strongly influenced by Hitler, took over leadership of the RSS in 1940, building on the work of Savarkar and taking it further (Jaffrelot 2007: 98).

3.2 Narendra Modi, Hinduism and Ecology

The current Indian government is led by Narendra Modi and his BJP party, the political wing of the Hindu nationalist movement, which also includes the RSS and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council; VHP). Modi swept to power in 2014, re-winning the election again in 2019, and frequently referred to Hinduism and ecology tropes in his political strategies and speeches to audiences within India and outside. It is no coincidence that Modi selected the city of Varanasi, also known as Kashi, as his constituency, the most holy city for

Hindus, through which the sacred Ganges flows. This gave additional import to his electioneering strategies that engaged with discourses around the sacredness of the Ganges alongside promises to clean up the dangerously polluted river and would have been appealing to a strongly Hindu audience. In the run-up to his 2014 election success he made promises to his devoted Hindu following that he would implement projects to clean up the Ganges where others had failed despite elaborate interventions over many decades. The promises to clean the Ganges were made alongside others at the heart of the Hindutva agenda, including cow protection and to build the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya (Madhukalya 2019).[1] In a rally speech in Varanasi on 20 December 2013 he implored:

> Brothers and Sisters, in the past … and future too – India's description, without Ganga cannot be complete. For others Ganga can be a river, but for us it is our mother, not just a river – Our Mother. Ganga isn't mere a flow of water, it depicts our culture (Modi 2014).

He continues, making the case that the current Congress Party-led government had done little or nothing to clean the sacred Ganges during its reign, despite election promises that they would, and that only a BJP government, which has the integrity of the Hindu nation as its priority, could be trusted to undertake this role. This was not, however, a new topic for him, with the *Times of India* reporting on an event he attended in 2003, when he was Chief Minister of Gujarat, on "Wildlife and Community" (jointly organised by Union and State ministries of environment and forests and the Gujarat Ecological Education and Research (GEER) Foundation) where he stated that:

> Ganges was pure [when] it was considered as Ma Ganga. But, once the community started treating it as only another river, Ganga got polluted … Tree felling in ancient times was considered a sin (Modi 2003).

Even when addressing external audiences, references to Hinduism and ecology are also present. In his address to the UN High-Level Dialogue on Desertification and Land Degradation and Drought in 2021 he stated that:

1 In 1992 there were violent clashes in the Northern city of Ayodhya, when Hindu zealots tore down a mosque that they believed had been built on land that marked the birthplace of their god Ram. The commitment to build a temple became an election promise of Hindu nationalist candidates and in December 2019 the Supreme Court gave the go-ahead for a temple to be built.

> In India, we have always given importance to land and considered the sacred Earth as our mother. India has taken the lead to highlight land degradation issues at international forums … It is mankind's collective responsibility to reverse the damage to land caused by human activity. It is our sacred duty to leave a healthy planet for our future generations (Modi 2021).

In such discourses, Pathak reflects on how Modi extolls Indians (in his speeches he talks about "Indians" rather than "Hindus" as a reflection of his Hinduisation of India) "as being effortlessly ecologically friendly" while at the same time his "claims of an environmentally friendly Indian tradition are not supported by empirical evidence. Nevertheless, these claims are widely encountered – and promoted – in India and abroad" (2021: 2). She argues that this is part of a process of "nation branding" where India is marketed as "a global leader in ecologically sustainable development" (2021: 3) that is rhetorically bolstered by recourse to arguments that this leadership position is possible because the population is "driven by seemingly timeless, sustainability-compatible values instilled by virtue of being Indian" (2021: 5).

3.3 *The History of the Hindu Nationalist Engagement with Hinduism and Ecology*

The alignment of Hinduism and ecology with Hindu nationalism is not something that emerged with the recent ascendency of the BJP party but has earlier roots. For instance, both Alley (2002) and Sharma (2009) have written about how Hindu nationalists in the 1990s, aspiring to gain office, began to draw upon Hinduism and ecology discourse as part of their campaigns. By the 1990s, India's sacred rivers had come to play a key role in the political campaigns of the BJP via the activities of the Hindu spiritual leader Swami Chinmayananda. In the run-up to the 1998 general election, in which he was standing as a candidate, he became the president of a new organisation called the Ganga Raksha Samiti (Committee for the Security of the Ganges), which in addition to a focus on addressing the pollution of the Ganges also promoted the cow protection movement and the concept of Bharat Mata ("mother India", a nationalist ideology where the land of India is personified as a goddess), as part of a broader Hindu nationalist agenda (Alley 2002: 224). For several weeks he embarked on a yatra or pilgrimage by boat along the Ganges with other VHP leaders and BJP candidates, making speeches that promised to oppose the Tehri Dam project that was proposed for the Ganges and to clean up the river where, as Alley writes, he stressed "Ganga's immanent power and the totalizing role she plays not only in Hinduism but in Indian civilization and national unity" (2002: 226). However, once he was elected to office, she observes that, "the campaign

against river pollution and the opposition to the Tehri Dam fell away almost immediately" (2002, p. 226). This does not mean that campaigns against big dam projects and river pollution came to a halt overall, just that the Hindu nationalists tended to lose interest once the election was over.

In terms of the anti-Tehri Dam campaign, the veteran activist Sunderlal Bahuguna maintained a continued presence at his protest site on the banks of the Ganges. In his speeches and writing he invoked neo-traditionalist discourses that constructed Hinduism as environmentally friendly (Sharma 2009). This overlap between the rhetoric of environmental activists and Hindu nationalists has received attention in the literature, with some aligning those who look to the Hindu tradition for ecological ethics with the Hindu Right (Baviskar 2004; Nanda 2002). For instance, Nanda draws attention to the ways in which the Indian eco-feminist Vandana Shiva "has become a leading light of Hindu ecology, and makes regular appearances in neo-Hindu [i.e. fundamentalist] ashrams in North America. Her work is most respectfully cited in *The Organiser*, the official journal of the RSS, the cultural arm of Hindu nationalist parties" (2002: 30). Indeed, as Mawdsley has questioned, is it possible to distinguish between those who look to the Hindu tradition as a means of encouraging ecological consciousness, or social justice, and those Hindu chauvinists who have "hijacked" the environmental movement as a means of promoting a broader political agenda that otherwise has little to do with conservation? Or is it a case of "guilt by association" (Mawdsley, 2006: 382)? In recent years, since the election success of the BJP, this question of whether it is possible to differentiate between Hindutva and the public or socially engaged expression of Hinduism has become more tense and pressing, with those on both sides of the political spectrum viewing them as increasingly convergent. For those on the political right the ultimate aim is to unify India under one single Hindu identity, while for those on the left, against the backdrop of an aggressive Hinduisation of society, there is suspicion that of all forms of Hinduism as liable to co-option by the Hindutva brigade.

3.4 *Pastoralism, the BJP and the "Myth of Primitive Ecological Wisdom"*

In the final part of this paper, I suggest that the BJP's embrace of Hinduism and ecology discourse and the implication that this aligns its mission with sustainable development is at odds with its development policies regarding livelihoods, where it aggressively pursues the Hinduisation of society. While the Modi government portrays itself to both domestic and international audiences as a leading champion for sustainable development, its drive for a modern market economy alongside the pursuit of Hindu nationalist politics is having an impact on communities with livelihoods and religious identities that do not meet the ambitions of the BJP (Chacko 2019; Jaffrelot 2021). Furthermore, its

embrace of the myth of primitive ecological wisdom becomes a proxy that deflects attention away from policies and actions that are at odds with the values apparently being promoted, while communities with livelihoods that are more sustainable than many modern alternatives (e.g. pastoralist and tribal/Adivasi) are increasingly under threat alongside their religio-cultural traditions that actually resemble beliefs and practices that are at the centre of Hinduism and ecology discourse.

One example of this are the estimated 13 million pastoralists in India (Kishore and Köhler-Rollefson 2020). Tambs-Lyche writes about Hindu pastoralists, including the Rabari, who are camel herders, in the states of Gujarat and Rajasthan (2021). According to one version of their myth of origin, the wife of the God Shiva, Parvati, moulded camels from the sweat and dust on Shiva's body, which Shiva then brought to life. This was similarly followed by the fashioning of human figures, the Rabari, who were assigned the sacred occupation of tending to the camels (Dyer 2014: 59). To this day, their Hindu beliefs and religious practices strongly reflect local geography and are linked to sacred sites in ancestral villages and along migration routes (Tambs-Lyche 2021). There is also some evidence that the deep connection between their religious traditions and the land and animals also had an impact on nature conservation in ways that practically supported their livelihood, although for the reasons discussed above it would be inaccurate to portray them as "inherent environmentalists" *per se*. For instance, patches of vegetation were preserved by the presence of goddess temples, leading to the protection of areas of pasture that could be used to feed animals during droughts (Tambs-Lyche 2021). With the encroachment of grazing land and the lack of policies to protect pastoralism (reflecting the failure of the BJP as well as preceding governments), the important contribution of such areas to the pastoralist economy has been lost.

While the land regime changes that have affected pastoralists have a legacy that can be traced back to the colonial period, the Hindu nationalist development agenda is today exacerbating transformations that make it ever more difficult for them to pursue their traditional livelihoods, as they lose access to their traditional grazing lands and are increasingly forced to take up settled occupations. Pastoralists are depicted as "backward" and "hard to reach" (Dyer 2014) and their livelihood as unproductive, fragile and marginal, in contrast to modern market-driven development. Against the backdrop of the BJP's embrace of sustainable development *and* rhetoric about traditional Indian cultures of nature conservation, one might expect a livelihood that is particularly well suited to dryland environments, and where communities' traditional knowledge systems are rooted in their rich religious and cultural heritage, to be well supported and promoted. However, on the contrary, pastoralists' contributions to India's regional rural economies go largely unrecognised,

in contrast to the disproportionate attention paid to the ecological destruction they are presumed to cause, despite evidence that suggests the opposite (Sharma et al. 2003: iii; Dyer 2014; Jitendra 2019). Alongside this, their practice of "popular Hinduism" that reflected a sacred connection to the land and animals is in decline as they embrace mainstream Hinduism, influenced by Hindu Nationalism (Tambs-Lyche 2018).

Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been to examine the construction of Hinduism as an environmentally friendly religion and how this has been appropriated by Hindu nationalists to support their Hindutva agenda in ways that do not further the aims of sustainable development. After tracing the emergence of religions and ecology discourses and the assertion that Asian or Eastern religions are inherently environmentally friendly, I criticised this neo-traditionalist approach for being anachronistic and essentialist, as well as for promoting a "myth of primitive ecological wisdom" (Milton 1996). Next, I examined the ways in which the current Indian government, which is led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), claims to be in pursuit of inclusive development and to have the SDGs at the heart of its development and economic policies, alongside invoking neo-traditionalist religions and ecology discourse. Despite this, its commitment to sustainable development is weak (Chandra 2021) and its bid to spread Hindu nationalist ideology, alongside the growth of the market economy (Chacko 2019), has led to increased social and religious inequality. In its efforts to spread a particular version of Hinduism across India alongside the growth of the market economy, some traditional livelihoods that are more sustainable than modern alternatives, such as nomadic pastoralism or Adivasi (tribal) economies, and the religio-cultural traditions that surround them, are being undermined and threatened with extinction.

With reference to the example of the Hindu Rabari community of nomadic pastoralists, traditionally camel herders, I examined the impact of their portrayal as backward and unproductive, alongside the lack of policies to support their livelihood, as contributing to the rapid decline of pastoralism. While I argued that it would be inaccurate to portray Rabaris as "inherent environmentalists", the fact that their religious beliefs and practices are linked to sacred sites in ancestral villages and along migration routes and played a role in nature conservation that contributed towards the support of their livelihood, might lead one to expect that pastoralism would be well supported and promoted by the BJP. On the contrary, we find that pastoralists' contributions to India's regional rural economies are largely unrecognised and their practice

of "popular Hinduism" that reflected a sacred connection to the land and animals is in decline as they embrace mainstream Hinduism, influenced by Hindu Nationalism (Tambs-Lyche 2018, 2021).

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The Role of Religions, Values, Ethics, and Spiritual Responsibility in Environmental Governance and Achieving the Sustainable Development Agenda

Policy and Practice Note

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Abstract

The Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 is the only viable framework that exists today providing a plan of action to tackle the complexity of development issues we are facing. One essential element in implementing this agenda is Goal 17, related to partnerships and the role of the whole of society in achieving these goals. Sustainable development is defined as the intersection of economic, social, and environmental sustainability. However, the fourth component of culture and traditional knowledge, while presumably integrated in all goals, has not been fully integrated, presenting a missed opportunity to enhance and strengthen the implementation and achievement of the sustainable development agenda. Religious values and belief systems are considered crucial elements of this cultural approach. Faith values and practices complement the scientific and technological approaches in dealing with the unprecedented environmental challenges of our time. This is especially important due to the commonality of religious values in living in harmony with nature. If seriously considered, adopting religious values leads to a change in individual behaviors and institutional policies that are crucial to reducing our environmental footprint and tackling the triple planetary crisis.

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religion – ethics – values – behavior – environment – governance

1 Introduction

The 2022 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report states that global greenhouse gas emissions will peak before 2025 with the adopted scenarios of limiting warming to 1.5°C and should be reduced by 43% by 2030 (IPCC 2022). The Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) warns that species extinction rates are accelerating and that assessments expect one million species to be threatened with extinction (IPBES 2019). Likewise, air pollution, according to the World Bank, is the leading environmental risk to health and cost an estimated USD 8.1 trillion in 2019 (The World Bank, 2016). Climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution have been identified by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) as the triple planetary crisis facing humanity (UNEP 2020).

The combination of these environmental problems with the already felt impacts of Covid-19 and the recent and protracted conflicts around the world that are causing economic and social downfall, as well as threatening the food security of many nations, especially vulnerable ones, are unprecedented challenges and, in order to address them, a different approach and a complete paradigm shift are needed. While technology and science have provided much-needed advances in development and offered important solutions, they are not enough, and new ways should be considered and employed to complete a transformational shift toward resolving such challenges.

The IPCC report of 2022 goes further in saying that we need to adopt the right policies and put the appropriate measures in place to enable changes to our lifestyles and behavior. The Stockholm Declaration of 1972 also refers to the essential role of spiritual growth that should be a result of the appropriate relationship between humans and the environment (Stockholm 1972). The same argument was made in the Stockholm+50 Conference in 2022 that ethics and spiritual connections should be adopted as alternatives to a new relationship between humans and the environment (Abumoghli 2022).

2 The Ethical Approach

UNEP is the leading environmental authority within the UN system and sets the global agenda on identified environmental issues through its UN Environment

Assembly (UNEA) as its intergovernmental governing council composed of 193 countries and a variety of stakeholders as observers which include civil society, youth groups, women's organizations, Indigenous Peoples, farmers, businesses, academia, workers and trade unions, and local authorities. The UN Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development defines sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (United Nations 2015). Sustainable development is the intersection of economic, social, and environmental stabilities. Religious groups and Indigenous Peoples, including their cultures and traditional knowledge, compromise the fourth component of sustainable development, namely culture. They are considered important contributors to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals as they enhance and strengthen the implementation and achievement of the 2030 Agenda. Although 80% of the global population consider themselves as religious and/or spiritual, religious groups are often neglected in policy making (Pew Research Centre 2012). They act as observers whose contributions are too often ignored, given the importance of their potential impact.

In 2017, UNEP established its Faith for Earth Initiative to enhance the engagement of faith actors in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and in addressing environmental challenges. UNEA is convened every two years to decide on and adopt resolutions that address the priorities for the international community. During the fifth session of UNEA held in 2022, 14 resolutions were adopted, with the landmark one related to ending plastic pollution and forging an international legally binding agreement by 2024 (UNEP 2022). The same UNEA, in its previous session, adopted the Mid-Term Strategy for UNEP identifying the triple planetary crisis as the environmental issues of focus over the next four years. The mid-term strategy has also identified working with religious institutions as an important approach to increase the role of civil society in contributing to addressing these environmental challenges.

Climate change, as has been felt by poor and rich countries alike, is not only an environmental issue, but also a socioeconomic and security issue threatening all nations, but certainly in different ways and different severities based on their adaptation readiness and capacity. It is the poorest nations, and the most marginalized sectors of society, including children, women, indigenous, religious, and ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities, that pay the highest price of the many impacts of climate change. The injustice of these environmental issues is that while the world wastes 30–40% of its food, one person in nine goes hungry (World Food Program USA 2022). Likewise, while women and children walk long distances to fetch unclean water for their families, the transportation sector contributes approximately one quarter of CO_2 emissions (UNEP, n.d.).

The environmental challenges we are facing today are the result of reckless and environmentally unsustainable development paradigms that we, humanity, have adopted since the Industrial Revolution, particularly in industrialized nations. Recent studies and reports refer to these challenges as the age of the Anthropocene, which is characterized by humans contributing the most to global changes (Conceição 2020). Exponential population growth, unlimited extractive industry, urbanization, overfishing, industrial pollution, and many others have been some of the main reasons for climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. However, these are the obvious reasons at the surface of things, but there are other underlying mechanisms that are often not acknowledged, not understood, and not accounted for. Other mechanisms include the crisis of greed, apathy, and indifference in attitudes of institutions and individuals leading to overconsumption and production. These include the finance sector and industry, which are driven by narratives of unlimited growth and capitalism shaping public opinion and belief. Such paradigms often juxtapose religious beliefs which promote living in harmony with nature. Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals means integrating the environment into all the 17 goals, as it is the basis of all life on Planet Earth. As such, none of the goals can fully be achieved without a healthy environment. Therefore, it is crucial to integrate ethical and value-based approaches to achieving them. A proactive paradigm associated with a new social contract between people and with nature. Religious values, beliefs, teachings, and indigenous knowledge, along with international standards of ethics, provide such a much-needed alternative paradigm to change people's attitudes and behaviors toward sustainably managing nature and natural resources. The current unsustainable development paradigm has led to the creation of unsustainable practices and attitudes for most people. Individuals who see improvements in their income tend to consume more and increase their environmental footprint (Hui-Ting Chang 2016). This disregards the ethical attitude in considering the limited capacity of Earth as our only planet and only source for natural resources. While the population is growing and many countries are experiencing economic progress, it is necessary to adopt a paradigm in which the resources of Planet Earth are not being depleted and sustainable development is made possible.

While industrial revolutions over the past 200 years have contributed to mechanization as well as connectivity through the internet and cyberspace, the revolution we need now is a transformational ethical revolution putting things back into the perspective of humans not being the superiors over all other living and non-living things. This requires integrating religious values and environmental ethics into global and local environmental governance systems. Religions and Indigenous Peoples' practices bring the cultural diversity that is important to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

3 Religion and Science

The power of science and scientific evidence can hardly be debated. This is especially true in the light of all the technological advancements and facilities that are available to scientists to assess, measure, and predict to a high level of precision. While some may see science and religion as two opposites on a spectrum, they, in fact, share many values and ideas. For instance, many theologians and scientists have written about "their awe and wonder at the history of the universe and of life on this planet, explaining that they see no conflict between their faith in God and the evidence of evolution" (National Academies, 2022). Indeed, it is science that is telling us what we are facing and where we are heading if we continue our trajectory of the same environmental behavior toward nature. Science too has provided the much-needed technological advancement to provide solutions to some development challenges. Religions and spiritual beliefs have, for centuries, taught to live and enjoy not only spiritual fulfilment, but also a healthy and prosperous life that humans need to live in harmony with nature. The five major faith groups – Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism – share values such as the connectedness between human, the natural world, and the divine (Climate Outreach 2016). Such values bring forth a feeling of shared responsibility for Planet Earth and its inhabitants. It is also important to consider the knowledge of religious groups and Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous and local knowledge is defined by UNESCO (n.d.) as the understandings, skills, and philosophies developed by societies with long histories of interaction with their natural surroundings. Such knowledge can supply much needed insight into how to manage natural resources and places, given that Indigenous communities have long lived harmoniously in and with nature and have a crucial understanding of it. Virtually all religions share a care and a responsibility for the planet. This was shown, for instance, when several faith leaders from different traditions and spiritual backgrounds signed the Multifaith Statement of the 23rd Conference of the Parties (COP23). This statement confirms that "For thousands of years, [their] traditions have taught [them] to care for Earth," and that the current environmental challenges also need to be addressed by faith groups (Living the Change, 2022). This represents a common understanding between scientists and religious leaders, scientific reports and sacred scripts, use of technology and religious practices about the severity of the triple planetary crisis and the need to act now. Certainly, there are areas where some misunderstanding exists between the two, but on environmental issues, there is almost complete agreement that human behavior is leading to environmental degradation and that it is our moral responsibility to live in harmony with nature.

Existing scientific solutions, especially those that are nature-based, are certainly necessary to tackle increasing carbon emissions and unsustainable extraction of resources. The use of solar power, wind energy, carbon capture and storage systems, and many others has been providing some hope for those without access to energy, or to replace fossil-fuel-based energy with clean and nature-based ones. So do religious and indigenous teachings and practices as they are leading by example in promoting sustainable lifestyles and sharing their insight and hope with their followers, shaping their attitudes toward more sustainable practices. The amalgamation of both religious teachings and science can provide a comprehensive approach to achieving sustainable development. On the one hand, people's behavior and consumption practices will be informed and influenced by an ethically value-based approach. On the other hand, science can provide the evidence as well as the technological advancement as alternative systems to environmentally destructive ones (National Academies; Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

Policy too plays an important role in environmental governance. The science/policy interface is our only option to ensure that national, regional, and global environmental issues are dealt with in a scientifically evidenced way (UNEP 2022). The Faith for Earth Initiative of UNEP when established in 2017 had the principal goal of engaging faith leaders and faith actors in policy dialogue with decision makers. When the initiative started, only two faith-based organizations were members of UNEP's accredited organizations. Currently, faith -based organizations represent more than 10% of all accredited organizations. Religious leaders and representatives of religious institutions have been making major contributions to the policy dialogue at the UN Environment Assembly (UNEP 2022a). The faith community has been coming together in many, if not all, international conventions and raising their voices, such as the most recent UN Environment Assemblies, COP26 and COP 27. Some of the faith-based organizations present include the Parliament of World's Religions, the World Council of Churches, Brahma Kumaris, and Bhumi Global. In many of these conventions and international meetings, the faith and interfaith communities submitted statements reflecting their call to action on climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, while at the same time committing to act in their own institutions (UNEP 2022b).

Another aspect is that religious institutions have been leading on is the divestment from fossil fuels and the greening of their own assets. There are many initiatives encouraging houses of worship to become more sustainable. In England, for instance, the Eco Church Award awards churches that have achieved sustainability in the five areas of Worship and Teaching, Management of Church Buildings, Management of Church Land, Community and Global Engagement, and Lifestyle (Eco Church Award 2020). Another organization

focusing on faith assets is Faith Invest, empowering faith groups to invest in line with their beliefs and values (FaithInvest 2019). The aim is to "support the rapidly developing movement of faiths actively using their investments to create a better world – for people and planet" (FaithInvest 2019). Additionally, there are reports and initiatives proposing ideas on how to reduce and store emissions on faith-owned land, promoting strategies like tree-planting and peat restoration like the *Church Land and the Climate Crisis: A Call to Action* report by Operation Noah and Bright Now. Faith institutions are the fourth-largest economic power with investments in all sectors (UNEP 2018). With hundreds of millions of houses of worship and more than 50% of schools owned by faith institutions, this is an important field for such institutions to lead the way in demonstrating that faith values work for the people and the planet. The convincing and convening powers of religions can influence the behavior of their members and lead to more sustainable practices. These powers are unmatched, even by the largest international organizations coming together. As faith followers generally strongly believe what their holy books say and instruct, sacred scriptures represent the power of convincing that is met with very little objection by religious followers. In spite of varying authority over the interpretation of sacred scripts in different religious traditions, the vast majority of religions and religious understandings exhibit a power of spiritual value that plays an important role not only in bringing peace among people, but also in social inclusion, as all religions call for serving everybody without distinction of marginalization.

4 A Common Value System

When calling for a common value system of religions, drawing not only from the five major faith groups but also smaller faith-based organizations and Indigenous communities, this does not mean preferring one over the other, or coming up with a new religious doctrine that encompasses all religions. It simply means consolidating the diversity in religious values and drawing beautiful linkages to explain the common approaches. Teachings of the different religions, put together, provide cohesion and comprehensiveness as well as linkages to contemporary environmental issues related to these values. The reimagining of the human/environment paper on religion and development by Abumoghli (2022) calls for the establishment of a universal ethical approach that is extracted from the different religions, as different religions address the same issues and express them in different ways but leading to the same results. For example, the concept of stewardship that is reflected in the Abrahamic religions is reflected in Buddhism and Hinduism as the Dharma, which demonstrates the responsibility of people and their duty of

care. Another example, Ahimsa in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, represents the concept of non-violence that agrees with compassion in Abraham religions. A third example is the concept of the middle way in Buddhism that resonates with the concept of Wasateyyah in Islam.

Change is necessary not only for individuals but also for institutions, corporations, and businesses. Having such knowledge of the common values in religions would make it easy for practitioners to connect environmental issues and religious values and to guide our consumption and production patterns. Many religions provide specific instructions on what to eat, what to drink, and how to dress. This is particularly important in moving toward a plant-based diet that reduces impacts on lands and contributes to fighting climate change.

Some religious leaders have been pioneering in drawing linkages between their religions and the environment. For example, the encyclical *Laudato si'* of Pope Francis published in 2015 goes into detail about the Christian approach to integral ecology, providing an institutional approach to the relationship between humans and their environment (The Holy See 2015). Similarly, *Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth* is a document being prepared by Muslim scholars deriving from the Quran and the practices of prophet Mohammad on how Muslims should deal with the environment and based on which Islamic principles (Al-Mizan, unpublished). The two religions are followed by almost 50 per cent of humanity, so such institutional efforts should aid in explaining, based on religious values, the relationship between the sacred scripts and contemporary environmental issues. Both documents make excellent references to scientific evidence and international reports making the linkages clear. If such an institutional approach were to be followed by other major religions, this would be an important step to explaining the spiritual connection between humans and nature. For faith groups like Hinduism and Buddhism which are organized and structured in a different, less hierarchical way, there are many scholars and schools of thought that, like in Abrahamic religions, concentrate their attention on the connection of spiritual and environmental issues.

Interfaith collaboration is essential in advancing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Even though coming from differing traditions, many faith groups have a common aim to protect the natural environment and combat the triple planetary crisis. By coming together and joining their efforts in achieving the 2030 Agenda, different faith groups can be much more effective and successful in protecting their common home. Interfaith and intra-faith collaboration is part of the much-needed multilateral approach to solving the complexity of issues that we are facing and that we are leaving behind to future generations. There are already many interfaith/intra-faith organizations focusing on environmental challenges such as PARD (Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development), the Parliament

of World's Religions, The United Religions Initiative, The Religions for Peace, and GreenFaith. Through interfaith collaboration, the faith-based groups can exchange knowledge, improve their capacity, engage in action for environmental sustainability, and be more effective in their responses to the world's current environmental challenges by working together. At the Stockholm+50 conference held in June 2022, 240 faith organizations came together and endorsed an interfaith statement calling upon governments and other stakeholders to adopt an alternative paradigm that respects the spiritual value of nature as well as the natural capital (UNEP 2022b). This will require providing the appropriate conducive environment and suitable platform for religious actors to come together. The Faith for Earth Coalition of UNEP is a good example where policy meets religion and the combination is showing dividends, such as the interfaith statement at Stockholm and the others as contributions to the UN Environment Assembly and other international fora.

5 Conclusions

Religions, beliefs, and ethical systems are key components in driving a transformational shift in people's behavior toward living in harmony with nature. Religions, which have existed for centuries, have solid value systems that when implemented to complement policies, scientific evidence, and technology will provide the needed impetus to accelerate the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, but will also create a sustainable spiritually energized generation that is driven by values and ethics. Change in behaviors and policies should happen at both the individual and institutional level and religions must come together to provide a consolidated ethical approach to facing climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution.

Disclaimer

The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations Environment Programme.

Issue and Editors

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