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# Sustainability as a Global Faith? The Religious Dimensions of Sustainability and Personal Risk

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Tracing the development of the religious dimensions of sustainability and sustainable development discourse, this article highlights the participation of religious individuals and groups in sustainability advocacy, and the manufacture of sustainability narratives which perform religious work. Since their inception, sustainability and its cognate, sustainable development, have been utilized in the public sphere to promote certain value sets and manage citizen populations. The religious dimensions of sustainability discourse have been some of the primary levers through which the social functions of sustainability have been realized. The term sustainability often acts as a shorthand reference to the core values, beliefs, and practices that particular individuals or groups would like to see persist over the long term. Focusing on the notion that it is largely the absence of conversations across these differing value structures and desirable futures that drives unsustainability, I highlight the work of nongovernmental leaders of sustainability movements who rely on what I have termed an ethic of personal risk.

## CLARIFYING THE TERMS: RELIGION AND SUSTAINABILITY

ACCORDING TO THE DEVELOPMENT SPECIALIST Jennifer Sumner, “[s]ome authors consider sustainability to be like an ethic . . .

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while others go so far as to see it almost like a religion, or at least a sacred cow” (2005: 77). By referring to it as a sacred cow she meant that sustainability is often imagined as a common set of values that are self-evident and immune to deep questioning or criticism, a symbol set onto which sacred norms are projected and subsequently protected. Is this similarity between sustainability and religion merely superficial? Or is the connection deeper, with the potential to help illuminate an understanding of how such discourse has functioned in global politics? I argue the latter. Indeed, the ideas and concepts that lie at the roots of sustainability are religious in at least three ways.<sup>1</sup> First, many of those who originally utilized the terms “sustainability” and “sustainable development” were themselves religious, or drew on explicitly religious imagery and metaphor to endorse their social vision. Thus, religious ideas were formative for early articulations of sustainability, and continue to be important. Second, the use of the term sustainability sometimes acts as a window into the core values and deep beliefs of the person or group utilizing it—values and beliefs that many people would refer to as religious. Third, when deployed in the public sphere, sustainability facilitates particular economic exchange relations, acts as a sort of social glue by promoting sets of shared languages and values, and focuses collective desire.<sup>2</sup> This is true of sustainability discourse whether it is deployed to support existing hegemonic powers or to subvert them. In this discourse, public deployments of sustainability can be understood as performing religious work, according to the definition provided by the religion scholar David Chidester (2005: 5). Chidester’s definition of religious work highlights that the term *religion* can be an effective tool to investigate popular understandings of religion, even including forms of cultural production related to baseball, Tupperware collecting, or the Coca-Cola brand name. Each of these modes of cultural production is contested, but in some ways—for instance, to the extent that they are public expressions of what some people find ultimately valuable and desirable—they are equally authentic.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>This does not suggest, however, that the norms associated with sustainability and defended by particular populations are in any way transcendent or necessarily related to supernatural beings.

<sup>2</sup>In a global context, there are now transnational networked communities bound together by shared ideals, goals, practices, or sacred norms.

<sup>3</sup>Chidester’s discussion of religious work begins by asking whether the term *religion*, which is etymologically related to the *authenticity* of practice or belief (opposed, in its Latin context, to *superstitio*)—not, it is important to note, related to belief in spiritual beings or institutionalization—is helpful in analyzing popular forms of devotion. Chidester ultimately answers the question affirmatively, arguing that religion can be defined in a conventional sense (as a term which refers to “religious traditions, communities, institutions or movements”) or in an analytic sense (“as a generic term for any kind of activity engaged with the transcendent, the sacred, or the ultimate concerns of human life”) (2005: 13). This does not mean that Chidester aims to legitimize the above practices, or

When sustainability discourse is used as a tool for connecting affective states with political issues related to resource utilization and distribution, the idea of sustainability is a political religion, doing religious work.<sup>4</sup>

The following argument unfolds through both analytical and normative modes. First is an analysis of the emergence of sustainability discourse and practice, and the historical importance of the religious dimensions of related social movements. This analysis sets the stage for the second, more normative claim that although they sometimes create intractable disputes, religious people and groups, as well as those who generate the more diffuse religious ambiance of much sustainability discourse, have in some cases inspired what might be called an ethic of personal risk. Such an approach to establishing relationships entails viewing political, social, or cultural “others” from a standpoint of humility, vulnerable to (or at least willing to empathetically consider) their worldviews, values, and behaviors. Such tactics may facilitate sustainable relationships between people with different values, increasing chances of long-term success for some sustainability ventures. They also raise the further question of whether encouraging an ethic of interpersonal and intercultural risk can be bioculturally adaptive by promoting the peaceful coexistence of cultures and societies even when they differ in their core value commitments.<sup>5</sup>

To pursue this argument, it is first necessary to briefly review the literature defining religion and sustainability, two notoriously slippery terms. Imagining the category *religion* as a multifaceted tool which helps to investigate the affective and normative dimensions of social movements that do not at first glance seem overtly religious has significant heuristic and analytic value. In addition, discussion of the historical roots of the notion of sustainability lays the groundwork for the more substantive

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that in invoking his work that my goal here is to legitimize or advance the religious attributes of sustainability discourse. It means, rather, that people engaged in these cultural practices (Tupperware parties, watching baseball, or in this case engaging in sustainability-related advocacy) use religious terms or draw on metaphors of the sacred to describe their own work and aims.

<sup>4</sup>The most common usage of the phrase *political religion* refers to political ideologies which are analogous in various ways to institutional religions. A less scrutinized but nonetheless prevalent form also includes instances of institutional religions or other religious groups centered on naturalistic forms of reverence which focus group identity around particular political platforms or goals. Both forms are evident within the sustainability milieu.

<sup>5</sup>It is important to note that I am *not* suggesting either (a) that religious people or institutions are somehow more sustainable (however defined) than other groups, or (b) that inclusion of core values and beliefs (religious or sacred values) in community deliberation inherently leads to peaceful or more sustainable outcomes. Indeed, it is clear that religion has often been the catalyst for war, violence, and other socially undesirable outcomes. I am simply characterizing the negotiation style of a particular network of high-level actors devoted to sustainability and proposing that it could be bioculturally adaptive. Such a hypothesis is empirically verifiable.

discussion of the many ways in which the term sustainability is deployed, and what an understanding of its religious dimensions illuminates about this discursive work.

For analytical purposes, here religion plays dual roles as it does in folk definitions of the term.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, it refers to institutional religions, their authoritative hierarchies, traditions, practices, and sacred sites. Within this type, the so-called world religions have played an important role in sustainability discourse, lending significant social and financial force to sustainability movements (see Palmer and Finlay 2003; Gottlieb 2009; Taylor 2009). On the other hand, the term religion also refers to modes of cultural production that utilize highly affective metaphors, imagery, and tropes related to ultimate purpose or fundamental core values to popularize or spread sustainability advocacy. These meta-narratives are evidence of what the geographer Aidan Davison has referred to as a “secular religion,” birthed through faith in Western understandings of “progress” and “development” (2008). Although these more subtle uses of religious language, metaphor, and imagery do not fit neatly into the traditional definitions approved by scholars of religion, as the anthropologist Benson Saler noted, “segments of the general public and persons pursuing special agendas often extend the use and inclusiveness of the term [religion] beyond conventional dictionary acceptations and supporting conceptualizations [and] . . . when they do so, they are usually understood by others” (Saler 1999: 23, italics in original). As we will see, interestingly, such sustainability-related religious cultural production can either reinforce the economic, political, or social status quo or challenge it.

Terms such as religion and sustainability were first deployed as tools—spiritualized justifications for controlling or channeling social behaviors and exchange relations. In the case of sustainability, its public import has a complex history dating back to the European origins of resource management practices and their North American articulation in the work of the United States’ first Chief Forester, Gifford Pinchot. The term *sustainability* was used to refer to wise human use and preservation of natural resources at least as early as the mid-1800s, when German scientists conducted experiments to discern which forest rotations would produce the largest yields over time (Worster 1993: 146; Berkes et al. 1998: 347). More generally, nature appreciation, at least in the form later identified with environmental movements, began in the cities and was

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<sup>6</sup>For more on how folk definitions and taxonomies inform moral reasoning, see Johnson (1993). For the use of religion as a folk category, see Benthall (2008: 7–9).

prompted by an ethic of scarcity (conferring normative importance on increasingly scarce resources) which seeped into European consciousness beginning in the late 1700s as resources were overexploited (Nash 2001). The first naturalists and resource managers used the idea of environmental limits and sustainable production as a tool to shape public opinion and policy, literally channeling social relations (Robbins 2004: 9). European foresters, for example, used systematic management to ensure that social chaos did not ensue from resource overexploitation (Worster 1993: 144–145). It was this management-oriented ethos that was exported to North America through the person of Gifford Pinchot, who was trained in Europe and later advocated conservation of the nation's resources for future generations. If the ethic of scarcity had motivated the first conservation efforts in continental Europe, then the subsequent celebration of wild places catalyzed the emergence of the "altar of wilderness" in the young United States.<sup>7</sup>

Although the early evangelists for this wilderness church—naturalists such as Thomas Morton, William Bartram, and John Muir, and the Transcendentalist authors Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman (see Gatta 2004; Taylor 2010: 42–60, 227–248 for discussion of their religious dimensions)—are well-known for their spiritual reverence for nature, less widely recognized are the significant religious dimensions of the United States' first nationally mandated resource management programs. Pinchot described his "Gospel of Efficiency" by connecting basic utilitarianism (the greatest good for the greatest number of people and trees) to Christian obligations (Hays 1999). Pinchot's beliefs were heavily influenced by the social gospel movement, which applied Christian principles to social crises caused by the industrial revolution (Naylor 2005). For example, Pinchot declared that "among the first duties of every man is to help in bringing the Kingdom of God on earth," and that "public spirit is patriotism in action; it is the application of Christianity to the commonwealth" (1910: 95–96).<sup>8</sup> Each person's moral duty, according to Pinchot, was to manifest Christian ideals in the society for the sustainability of the nation. Although Pinchot was removed from his post by President Taft, his influence on resource management regimes

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<sup>7</sup>I take the term "altar of the wilderness" from William Cronon's response to numerous critics of his well-known essay "The Trouble with Wilderness," where he admitted that wild places were also where he worshipped (Cronon 1996a, 1996b). The historian Roderick Nash argued that "if, as many suspected, wilderness was the medium through which God spoke most clearly, then America had a distinct moral advantage over Europe, where centuries of civilization had deposited a layer of artificiality over His works" (2001: 69).

<sup>8</sup>These are but exemplars of the type of religious language that runs throughout Pinchot's published works.

in North America should not be underestimated. His management-oriented conservation ethos (allowing exploitation of federal lands) persists today, though its genesis in the application of Christian principles to public resources is rarely acknowledged. From its European and North American roots, then, sustainability and sustainable development discourse was centrally concerned with social order, and in the United States, had significant religious dimensions.

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS OF SUSTAINABILITY IN THE TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES

As sustainability discourse and sustainable development practices evolved in the twentieth century, they took on significant international dimensions. It was in these contexts that universal or normative definitions of sustainable development became commonplace, and such concepts and practices often evidenced religious dimensions. Thanks to Pinchot's early efforts and the post-World War interest in alleviating poverty, the discourse of development was increasingly tethered to the idea of sustainable resource use. But by the second half of the twentieth century, many scholars cautioned that sustainability and sustainable development advocates often made presuppositions that were based on Western notions of progress, and were therefore poorly suited to the physical and cultural environments of the global south (Stavenhagen 1970, 1990; Escobar 1994; Davison 2001; Sumner 2005).

As the development expert Gilbert Rist argued, the notion of development was a key to the West's economic, political, and ideological conquests, for "by defining itself as the precursor of a history common to all, the West could treat colonization as a generous undertaking to 'help' more or less 'backward' societies along the road to civilization" (1997: 43). What Rist called the "global faith" of (sustainable) development was increasingly touted by governments and multinational groups such as the United Nations (UN) as the means to alleviate poverty and increase security (1997).<sup>9</sup> According to this line of argumentation, the sustainable development mission of the UN and Bretton Woods institutions (the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and the World Bank) was imagined as an unquestionable and presumably "natural" development. Rist did

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<sup>9</sup>For a more extended treatment of how "development" and "sustainability" were married over time, see Johnston (2010a).

not note, however, that one of the reasons that the concept of development was easily accepted in the cultural West as “natural” was that it originated in specifically Christian values and moral anthropologies. In other words, development (and I would add sustainable development) could be readily absorbed by the wider culture because it worked in concert with, and actually derived from, a broader (and probably partially imagined) consensus about values that had been forged in the nation’s Christian past (Tuveson 1980 [1968]).<sup>10</sup>

In the twentieth century, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as the United Nations, the World Wildlife Fund, and the World Bank and documents such as the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment have been some of the primary evangelists of sustainable development. These politically oriented NGOs manufacture a religious metanarrative related to sustainability that is at least an analog of institutional religions. For example, the current Secretary-General of the UN, Ban Ki-Moon, has acknowledged that while the UN necessarily strives to stand outside any particular religious tradition, in a very real sense, the UN is itself “an instrument of faith . . . inspired by what unites, not by what divides, the great religions of the world” (Neff 2007). The key motivation for participating in the quest for a better, more sustainable world, according to Ban, is often religious:

If you ask the people who work for the United Nations what motivates them—whether they are building peace in Timor-Leste, fighting human trafficking in Eastern Europe, or battling AIDS in Africa—many reply in a language of faith. They see what they do as a mission, not a job. (Neff 2007)

The religious dimensions of sustainability have been deployed to advertise United Nations-sponsored visions of sustainable development (UNESCO 1988; WWF, World Bank, IUCN/UNEP/WWF 1991; Johnston 2010a: 178–182), as well as to advertise indigenous and other marginalized peoples’ dramatically different deployments of sustainability (Hart 2005; Taylor 2010; Johnston 2010a: 182–183).<sup>11</sup> Significantly, some of these NGOs have utilized nonpartisan, religiously tinged political documents (i.e., the Earth Charter) to promote sustainability as a globally applicable spiritual narrative, or at least to advance sustainability as a set of globally applicable environmental norms. In a sense, they are promoting what amounts to a theology of sustainable development.

<sup>10</sup>I am indebted to Robin Globus Veldman here, who pointed me toward Tuveson’s work.

<sup>11</sup>For another example, see the Earth Charter <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/The-Earth-Charter.html>, June 14, 2010.



Other NGOs, such as the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), have also promoted cooperation among international political groups and institutional religions, but they do not endorse a common or universal ethic. Since its inception, the ARC has been on the leading edge of programs and initiatives that combine the energies of the UN and faith groups.<sup>12</sup> They have developed several programs dedicated to bringing religious groups, political institutions, and representatives of civil society together to work toward sustainability, including their Sacred Gifts program (in conjunction with the World Wildlife Fund), the Faiths and Biodiversity program (with the World Bank), and the Faith and Forests initiative (with the Forest Stewardship Council and the WWF) (Palmer and Finlay 2003).

Several works have now detailed how religious individuals and groups have shaped sustainability and sustainable discourse in Europe and North America (Palmer and Finlay 2003; Gottlieb 2009; Taylor 2010). In addition, the ways in which the term sustainability is used by indigenous or other marginalized groups to preserve land tenure and resist corporate resource extraction has received some attention (Wright 2004, 2009; Witt 2011). Of course, the concept of sustainability may also be deployed by corporations such as British Petroleum or caustic chemical manufacturers to describe efforts to reduce the harmful effects of their products.<sup>13</sup> It is because of the remarkable flexibility of the term and its potential for co-optation by guardians of the status quo that local-level sustainability efforts, international sustainable development schemes, and sustainable international relations require a more problem-focused, pragmatic discussion to make explicit the core values of key stakeholders. Although all of these organizations and their leaders have particular strategic aims, and thus are potentially targets of the critique leveled here, those that are explicit about their core values and goals can be more adaptive and sustainable over the long term.

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<sup>12</sup>The ARC was founded in 1995 “to link the secular worlds of conservation and ecology with the faith worlds of the major religions” (see, <http://www.arcworld.org/about.asp?pageID=2>, accessed August 31, 2008).

<sup>13</sup>See, for example, the webpage labeled “Sustainability”: <http://www.bp.com/sectionbodycopy.do?categoryId=3311&contentId=7066754> (accessed August 5, 2013). This page has expanded significantly since the massive oil spill from BP’s Deepwater Horizon well in 2010. Previously, BP’s sustainability statement was under the heading “Environment and Society” (accessed June 14, 2010, but this link is no longer operational). Or see the understandings of sustainability advertised by the World Chemistry Council (WCC): <http://www.worldchlorine.org/sustainability/index.html> (accessed August 5, 2013). Interestingly, in 1998, the Chlorine Chemistry Council convened the Ethics and Sustainability Dialog Group, composed of industry leaders and religious ethicists to address the negative impacts of chlorine chemistry (Byers and Nash 2005).



In many cases, NGOs act as messengers between different constituencies, translating language related to core values and beliefs, which according to the definition exercised here are spiritual narratives. One strategy utilized by some of these actors to gain the trust of diverse stakeholders is an ethic of personal risk which focuses on translating core values among and between diverse constituencies, both religious and secular.

### AN ETHIC OF PERSONAL RISK

While universalizing and normative definitions of sustainability and sustainable development often obscure important localized conservation motivations and values, some are offering a slower, though perhaps more sustainable, approach to consensus-building. Typically when the potential contributions of religion are addressed in discussions of sustainability, they take the shape of anecdotes about successful activism, or manifest in efforts to mine the conceptual resources of the so-called world religions for green gems (Callicott 1994; Tucker and Grim 1998).<sup>14</sup> But they have a more important practical function: the inclusion of religious (core) values in conservation and development debates can facilitate sustainable relationships between people with different values. Participation in and interview work among sustainability subcultures, as well as targeted in-depth interviews with thought leaders and case analyses of sustainability-oriented religious, interfaith, and secular NGOs, has illustrated that strategies which focus on the translation of core values and deep beliefs can be particularly important in facilitating communication and cooperation between groups who have distinctly different ideas of what sustainability is and the pathways by which it can be achieved.<sup>15</sup>

The common emphasis on the need to approach political, social, or cultural “others” from a standpoint of humility, vulnerable to their worldviews, values, and behaviors, is the essence of the ethic of personal risk. Its focus is displaying the central values, motivations, and perceived future goals of different individuals and groups, holding them up for

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<sup>14</sup>Callicott’s book is not limited to the world religions, but also includes analysis of indigenous cosmologies and ethics. His survey of environmental ethics “from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian outback” is cited and affirmed in the Series Foreword for volumes on the so-called World Religions and Ecology, published by Harvard’s Center for the Study of World Religions. The foreword was authored by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, who provided the ample energy required to organize the conference and books series, and create the Forum on Religion and Ecology. The volume cited here is the first volume of the series.

<sup>15</sup>The fieldwork related to this writing consisted of targeted in-depth interviews with twenty-five thought leaders in NGOs, as well as dozens of other semi-structured, informal interviews with activists and advocates.

scrutiny, and acknowledging the inherent risk to all stakeholders, whether they risk challenges to personal or communal worldviews, production and consumption habits, or social arrangements. The normative import of personal risk shares with Sharon Welch's feminist ethic of risk (1990) the notions that engagement with "others" requires relinquishing power over them to some extent, that an ethic of risk is grounded in community, and that the risks taken are strategic.<sup>16</sup> Welch sees such engagement, however, as ultimately grounded in an ethic of resistance to hegemonic powers. But the intention of some UN agencies and Western NGOs to facilitate the protection of locally devised adaptive strategies illustrates that such an approach may also be undertaken by those who hold power in an effort to cede it to others in a spirit of cooperation. Many of the high-level actors that were the focus of this research were engaged in such risky partnerships with foreign individuals and groups, or acted as translators between constituencies cultivating such relationships. Applied more broadly, such strategies could provide additional empirical evidence that illuminates what is important to various stakeholders in debates about the substance of sustainability and the means by which it may be achieved. Exploring the religious dimensions of sustainability and the ethic of personal risk can even be helpful forms of social therapy.

#### WHY THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS OF SUSTAINABILITY AND THE ETHIC OF PERSONAL RISK MATTER

To the extent that sustainability discourse functions like religion—a shorthand reference for the most important practices and values that particular communities would like to see sustained indefinitely—those who strategically deploy it in the public sphere point toward an important question: do visions of sustainability that emphasize democratic participation and life-affirming values (however defined), packaged for the developing world in terms of "freedom and democracy" or "global ethics," act as evangelists for a global faith that merely perpetuates the central values of Western colonialist cultures?

Invocations of a global sustainability ethic, advocated in the international political arena largely by scholars of religion (Rockefeller 2005; Tucker 2006, 2008; Jenkins 2008; Kung 2008), can be problematic precisely because they strengthen the boundaries between strong religious groups and cultural mainstreams and re-inscribe the social boundaries

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<sup>16</sup>For her definition of a feminist ethic of risk, see Welch (1990: 20).

that prevent nonmainstream groups from participating in international political agreements.<sup>17</sup> As the sociologists Richard Sosis and Candace Alcorta put it, “liberal religious ideologies are not compelling substitutes for those seeking an all-encompassing religious life” (2008: 119). Martin Palmer, the Secretary-General of the ARC, explained that the global ethic offered by the theologian Hans Kung is “academically interesting, but ultimately irrelevant to the world I work in . . . that’s not what I’m dealing with when I’m in Indonesia working with single mothers running a logging operation according to the Qur’an” (interview May 29, 2008). If, as psychologists Megan Bang and Douglas Medin and anthropologist Scott Atran (2007) have shown, individuals and groups from different cultural backgrounds perceive normative commitments in ontologically different terms, then attempts to forge a global ethic are wrongheaded. Not only is it unrealistic to expect communities to give up their own religious commitments, but ultimately such a strategy detracts energy from what could be a much more powerful pluralistic conversation about sustainability.

Some examples of how the ethic of personal risk works may be illustrative. When discussing how his organization has been able to effectively bridge gaps between religious and secular groups across the globe, Martin Palmer said that “Partnership is actually about the risk [that] you might change. If you’re not prepared to take that risk and to do so with integrity, we can’t work with you. It’s very much like a marriage in that sense.” He went on to say that many development- or conservation-oriented groups utilized purely descriptive understandings of sustainable development, presenting ready-made answers to peoples from other cultural backgrounds with widely variable problems (interview May 27, 2008).<sup>18</sup> To the extent that they were unwilling to risk changing preexisting plans or to hear what problems were most pressing for local residents, they were not participating in a sustainable “marriage,” a two-way relationship sensitive to others’ needs. According to Palmer, building consensus and making progress on policy issues requires translating value sets and worldviews between different constituencies. As Palmer put it, “Because we’re able to speak the language of both sides [international political organizations and local groups] . . . we are a trusted mediator” (interview May 27, 2008).

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<sup>17</sup>Referring to “strong” religions, I am following the work of Almond et al. (2003), among others, who argue that strong religious groups reject liberal and pluralistic forms of belief and practice and present a potential for conflict.

<sup>18</sup>For critiques of “descriptive” definitions of sustainability, which are often presumed to be value neutral, see Norton (2005).

Engaging groups with different value preferences and goals is no easy task. The ARC was perhaps the first conservation-oriented NGO to cultivate a relationship with the World Bank (which environmental groups often considered an obstacle to sustainable development). But the partnership was rooted in ARC's honest rendering of the complicity of the Bank in the ongoing destruction of ecosystems and cultures. At ARC's 1995 launch at Windsor Castle, one of the Bank's executives presented the usual statistical and graphical representations of data, prompting a response from ARC's poet, who was present.<sup>19</sup> The poem read:

Somewhere between Christ and Lucifer  
with your silver-grey hair and your quick, silver tongue,  
as you slide the transparencies over each other,  
Mercurial in the projector's glow . . .

And your shadow . . . as your rapid, polished monologue lulls us  
into believing, into hoping even, beyond the figures  
you skate over like thinning ice,  
smiling, energizing as you  
arabesque and spin and stop dead  
with your hand outstretched to grasp . . .

And I could—we could all—almost vote for you now  
as the Father of Comfort and Finance and Light,  
making us feel as safe and secure as we need.

It's not that I don't believe you, or see how easy it is  
for us to trust you.  
Everything you say is right on, and good. It stands.  
It's just . . . that He is crucified everywhere on earth where you arrive  
with your plans, and panaceas.  
It's just . . . you can't serve two masters without being bought,  
or sold.<sup>20</sup>

When Palmer brought this poem and other religiously inspired conservation narratives to the World Bank for publication in their planned, jointly published report, the World Bank editors balked because there were not enough "facts" in the stories. As a multilateral development institution

<sup>19</sup>Palmer said that since the founding event for ARC, he has insisted that both a poet and an artist are present at all ARC events and meetings (interview May 27, 2008). They provide impressions of the events through their respective media. The poet, in this case, was unnamed.

<sup>20</sup>This poem is unpublished. Palmer read it to me from a piece of paper.

beholden to a variety of stakeholders, they could only publish facts. Palmer and his colleagues informed the Bank that if they wanted to genuinely engage with the world's faith traditions they had to listen to such stories. Palmer related this story with some satisfaction: "In the end, they passed an editorial decision. That is, according to the World Bank, *myths, legends and tales are facts*. And on that basis, they were able to publish the book" (interview May 27, 2008).<sup>21</sup> By deciding to listen to the stories of some of the world's faiths, the World Bank was also helping to broaden the scope of its own story by raising the possibility that new sorts of information, such as religious narratives, could provide data for normative decision-making. It was at that time rare (at best) for a multilateral development organization to consider poems as a source of data. But in this case, a poem and a carefully reasoned concession effectively created a policy shift in one of the world's most politically insular institutions and created a positive interorganizational relationship.

The importance of translating across disparate value sets is important among ostensibly secular sustainability advocates also, for in many cases values are couched in narratives that, although not overtly religious, are religion-resembling. For instance, Hunter Lovins, founder and director of Natural Capitalism Solutions, confided that "Americans, and probably everybody really, want three things: *prosperity, security and meaning*" (interview August 6, 2008). For Lovins, instructions on how to achieve these basic desires for prosperity, security, and meaning are nearly always couched in stories. For her, highly affective stories that refer to core values are cognitive tools for creating more sustainable societies. Stories about what individuals, groups, and communities value, then, are important instruments that may be adapted and deployed in the quest for sustainability. Similarly, sustainability advocate and educator Anders Edwards (2005) suggested that the "principles" of sustainability are better imagined as stories, or Songlines, drawing on the Australian Aboriginal use of Songlines as mythological "tracks" through particular landscapes which are passed down orally. "The principles of sustainability," stated Edwards, "represent the footprints of the various groups that make up the Sustainability Revolution. Like the Songlines, these statements of principles articulate a group's values, archive its history, and indicate the future direction of its actions" (2005: 26). Like other religious stories, Songlines display a group's priorities, and like other narratives (including those tied to sustainability advocacy), they are "deep" stories that transgress

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<sup>21</sup>The book was *Faiths in Conservation* (Palmer and Finlay 2003).

temporal and political boundaries by trafficking in affectively oriented protagonists and plotlines.

Examples of ostensibly secular narratives that have influenced sustainability discourse and which have strong religious dimensions include biophilic stories, drawn from the life sciences, which provide new narratives about how and why humans ought to preserve biodiversity (Wilson 1984; Kellert and Wilson 1993; Kellert 2007; see also Johnston 2010b). For instance, the environmental educator David Orr has warned that without profound experiences in nature human survival is in question: “We will not enter this new kingdom of sustainability until we allow our children the kind of childhood in which biophilia can put down roots” (2001: VI-12).<sup>22</sup> Cosmophilic stories also contribute to sustainability discourse, often drawing on the “Epic of Evolution,” a phrase that refers to awe and reverence for the cosmos engendered by the recognition of its long history and increasing complexity (Dowd 2008; Johnston 2010b). As the independent scientist James Lovelock, who popularized the Gaia hypothesis, put it,

Ancient belief and modern knowledge have fused emotionally in the awe with which astronauts with their own eyes and we by indirect vision have seen the earth revealed in all its shining beauty against the deep darkness of space. . . . Like a religious belief, it is scientifically untestable and therefore incapable in its own context of further rationalization. (NWEI 2001, II-5)<sup>23</sup>

As Lovins noted, these stories are tools forged for the quest toward sustainability. Lovins related her strategy for deploying these tools in public talks: “I very consciously address these issues of prosperity, security, and meaning. . . . So I end my talks with pictures of the Lord of the Rings [a popular book and now movie series], and Gandalf [a ‘good’ wizard from the books], which is mythic . . . good vs. evil. And [I talk about] the role of little people and individuals in tackling the great challenges.” She related these affectively rich tales to what she believes are real-life evils:

<sup>22</sup>The selection was drawn from Orr’s “The Coming Biophilia Revolution” in his book *Earth in Mind* (1994). This and the quote below from Lovelock are also included in a reader compiled by the Northwest Earth Institute (NWEI). The NWEI is a sustainability-oriented organization which targets the general public through discussion groups. These discussion groups are held at churches, schools, and homes and have included well over one hundred thousand individuals in the United States as of this writing. The appearance of such spiritual themes in popular discussions of sustainability illustrates the prevalence of the religious dimensions of sustainability.

<sup>23</sup>The NWEI reader draws the selection from Andrew Dobson’s *The Green Reader* (1991). The original appears in Lovelock (1979: 152, vii, 9–11, 19–20, 25–26).

“the loss of all major ecosystems on earth, and climate crisis, and peak oil” (interview August 6, 2008).

Such stories are vessels for the transmission of values, and sharing them can facilitate sustainable partnerships between groups with significantly different visions of the good life. A willingness to share such stories, and hold them up for scrutiny, is the essence of the ethic of personal risk.

Stories about what constitutes “the good life” are becoming increasingly popular, for instance among evangelical Christians in North America, and in some cases, these constituencies have formed risky partnerships. To illustrate, according to participant Cal DeWitt (an ecologist and evangelical), the “Climate Forum 2002” at Oxford (UK) (a meeting of scientists, policy makers, and Christian leaders) was designed to achieve the goal of getting “American evangelicals and scientists to see if we could *penetrate* the evangelical community” (interview April 8, 2008).<sup>24</sup> A follow-up meeting was held in December 2006 at Melhana Plantation in southern Georgia, United States, resulting in a resolution released on January 17, 2007 titled “An Urgent Call to Action.”<sup>25</sup> The combined group declared that in their dialogue they “happily discovered far more concordance than any of us had expected, quickly moving beyond dialogue to a shared sense of moral purpose. Important initiatives were already underway on both sides, and when compared they were found to be broadly overlapping.” Beyond this encouraging convergence of aims, the collective expressed significant nonanthropocentric sentiment when they argued that protecting biological diversity was a “profound moral imperative” which serves “the interests of all humanity as well as the value of the non-human world.”

Some churches and their leaders are spreading the same message. Northland Church in Longwood, Florida, is a nondenominational evangelical community which fosters a group called “Creation, I Care.” One church member and “Creation, I Care” participant reflected on how his faith leaders had encouraged him to make small behavioral changes, which in turn affected the quality of his relationships with people outside his typical affinity groups. His testimonial was posted on the church’s web site:

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<sup>24</sup>A press release from the Oxford Climate Forum was available online (<http://www.jri.org.uk/news/statement.htm>) through the John Ray Initiative web site (accessed August 5, 2013). The John Ray Initiative is a nonprofit educational organization focused on integrating Christian teachings with scientific knowledge.

<sup>25</sup>The full text is available at <http://www-tc.pbs.org/now/shows/343/letter.pdf>, accessed August 5, 2013. All quotes in this paragraph are drawn from the full-text document available at the PBS web site.



I felt like for the first time, as I have taken some very minor steps [toward eco-friendly behaviors], I was engaging people who I sought to reach. Now instead of just articulating my differences, I am making progress in loving them. I've even become vigilant about rinsing out the recyclables. We are buying more efficient light bulbs and even bought a blanket for my hot water heater. Christ is still returning, and I'm not a tree hugger, but the environment is becoming an area of concern.<sup>26</sup>

This concern with talking to others about their values with a genuine interest in generating sustainability programs that foster those values is an example of the ethic of personal risk. Lovins ended one of her stories with the profound point that, "if you look at what's driving unsustainability, it is largely, I think, *the absence of these conversations across value structures*" (interview August 6, 2008, emphasis added).

In the cases above, NGOs and the intellectual leaders at their helms are acting as shepherds of the emergence of a new global order that is not grounded in the traditional power of the nation-state. The question is whether this new global order can evolve a set of ears that will listen to these diverse stories, and foster the practices and values that particular communities and cultures wish to see sustained into the future. Or whether, instead, the future will witness the further development of a minimum common denominator global ethic that speaks primarily to mainstream groups, and then only to the liberal mainstreams of those groups (Taylor 2005). What is clear is that the emerging networks of relations among sustainability advocates are transnational and polycentric. The informants discussed above are just a few of those who emphasized that they actively cultivate partnerships *not* because they have similar worldviews, or even because they have found some ethical common ground, but rather precisely because they have been explicit about the differences between them. They have engaged others recognizing the mutual vulnerability and risk such engagement entails.

## CONCLUSIONS

Sustainability discourse comprises narratives that point toward transcendent norms, and in some cases, they promote a moral anthropology that is envisioned as a response to Western patterns of cultural

<sup>26</sup>Testimonies at [www.creationicare.net/2007/05/why\\_i\\_care\\_dan\\_.html](http://www.creationicare.net/2007/05/why_i_care_dan_.html), accessed March 15, 2008. The "Creation, I Care" task force has moved from their review and assessment period to the implementation phase. A former participant indicated it was not meant to be a permanent committee. As of this writing, the webpage is no longer active.

production.<sup>27</sup> The historical importance of the religious dimensions of sustainability and its continuing significance recall the question raised in the title of this article: Is sustainability a global faith? Sustainability does have strong religious dimensions and is a global phenomenon. Yet the interaction with religion is not merely superficial. Especially in the industrialized world, sustainability and sustainable development have been significantly influenced by global religions (particularly some of the Abrahamic traditions), and the outcomes of sustainability advocacy have been re-broadcast internationally in spiritualized metanarratives (see, for example, Taylor's 2004 description of the opening pageant of the Johannesburg Earth Summit). In short, the discourse of sustainability is permeated with religious elements from roots to shoots. Thus, while sustainability movements are not *all about religion*, they certainly utilize religious metaphor and imagery and call for the reassessment of the meta-objectives of particular cultural groups. They are both *analogically* related to religious movements (that is, they *resemble* more prototypical religions) and *genealogically* related to religious beliefs and practices (which is to say that religious groups and movements have contributed to the present shape of secular sustainability movements).<sup>28</sup> In both cases, concepts related to sustainability focus community activities and channel social behaviors, and are therefore doing religious work. If understandings of sustainability are reflective of the community-specific practices and values that people wish to sustain, then for analytical purposes, it is better to point out the differences between these understandings than it is to manufacture nonempirical similarities (such as a pluralistic global ethic) that are supposedly applicable to all.

Explicit renderings of core values and deep beliefs in the public sphere—a willingness to risk them in interpersonal and intergroup encounters—both at the international level and at the local level can act

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<sup>27</sup>By referring to the “moral anthropology” implied by sustainability discourse, I mean that in the industrialized global north the concept of sustainability promotes a critique of the prevailing understanding of the place of humans in the world. The dominant paradigm assumes that humans occupy a position somehow above or superior to other organisms, and that all decisions (including decisions about environmental issues) can be made through an economic calculus which treats ecological problems as a subset of cost-benefit analysis. The discourse of sustainability often reverses these assumptions, imagining humans as part of an interdependent web of life, and envisioning the economy as a *subset of* and *dependent upon* the proper functioning of ecological systems. This is true even in cases of “green consumerism,” such as that encountered in the Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability (LOHAS) movement (Emerich 2011).

<sup>28</sup>At the “Inherited Land” colloquium at Florida International University, February 28, 2009, Evan Berry argued that both are potentially productive ways of looking at social movements that involve religion. The analogical approach suggests that it is primarily the religious *form* that is the vehicle for cultural transmission, but according to Berry “structural functionalism and other social scientific theories of ‘quasi-religions’ tend to obscure the religiosity of nature religion” (2009: 13).

as a sort of social therapy by (a) providing a pathway for engaging in empathetic negotiation with others and (b) illuminating the overlaps between the values of diverse constituencies so that it is possible to discern which wicked social and ecological problems require solving. Recognizing when sacred values are at stake is important because symbolic concessions related to others' core values, though in some cases of little or no practical value, can signal a willingness to engage in further negotiation (Sosis and Alcorta 2008). If human cultures are to grow more sustainable on a global scale, then in evolutionary terms, the ethic of personal risk is an important meme—a unit of cultural selection—to cultivate. If Lovins is correct, and the failure to talk across value structures is the primary driver of unsustainability, then the partnerships like the ones recounted above are pivotal because they facilitate communication across these value structures. As the above stories reveal, religious individuals and groups have often used their faith as a motivator for engaging in such empathetic negotiation. It should be remembered, though, that secular organizations and people who are willing to dialog at the level of core values and beliefs are also players in these highly political, somewhat risky spiritual contests.

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