

Eco-Spirituality in Environmental Action

Studying Dark Green Religion in the German Energy Transition

Draft Version

Article published in: Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture 12(1):34-54,
March 2018.

DOI: 10.1558/jsrnc.33915

Author: Jens Koehrsen, Center for Religion, Economy and Politics University of Basel,
Switzerland

Address: Jens Köhrsen, University Basel, Faculty of Theology, Nadelberg 10
4051 Basel, Switzerland.

Email: jens.koehrsen@unibas.ch

Abstract

There is a rising debate about the religious dimensions of environmentalism. A prominent approach to this phenomenon is Bron Taylor's Dark Green Religion. Taylor proposes that Dark Green Religion is a globally growing phenomenon which involves 'para-religious' perceptions and feelings towards nature. Followers of Dark Green Religion would experience feelings of connectedness to nature, consider it to be sacred and worthy of reverent care, and reject anthropocentrism. I discuss Taylor's argument in the light of a study on an urban energy transition process in Northern Germany. Interviewing actors strongly participating in this process, I find some evidence for features of Dark Green Religion while also revealing their ongoing anthropocentric orientations. The findings suggest a need for more in-depth studies to improve our understanding of eco-religious worldviews among environmentally engaged actors and their impact on sustainability transitions.

Keywords: energy transition, dark green religion, Ecospirituality, worldviews, forerunners, sustainability, cities, urban low carbon transition, Germany, anthropocentrism

Introduction

Dark Green Religion is, according to Bron Taylor, a globally growing phenomenon which involves strong feelings of attachment to nature and a perception of nature as sacred (Taylor 2004; Taylor 2008; Taylor 2010). Perceiving nature as sacred and feeling attached to it, followers of Dark Green Religion regard nature as having a value in itself—independent of its value for human beings—and therefore experience a need to protect it against harmful human interventions.

Given that these eco-religious worldviews and feelings are likely to provoke pro-

environmental engagement, Dark Green Religion may also play a role in the ongoing sustainability transitions of Western societies: wide-ranging social transformation processes toward more sustainable modes of supply, consumption, and production (Markard, Raven and Truffer 2012). Crucial for these processes are energy transitions which seek to establish more sustainable, low-carbon energy systems. Particularly among the intrinsically driven pioneers in these processes, eco-religious worldviews and feelings may play an important role in spurring their engagement. However, there are, so far, few empirical, in-depth studies on Dark Green Religion among leading actors engaging in energy transitions. Against this background, this article studies whether and in what way features of Dark Green Religion may become manifest among actors strongly engaging in the energy transition process of the Northern German city of Emden.

The study focuses on ‘non-religious’ actors: organizations and individuals that are not primarily related with the religious sphere via their professional occupations. While religious actors include, for instance, churches and pastors, ‘non-religious’ actors include politicians, businesses, and researchers. Labeling these actors as ‘non-religious’ only refers to their primary sectoral background and does not imply that they abstain from relating to religious worldviews or values.

This study has selected actors that are primarily related to ‘non-religious’ social spheres and work for the local energy transition in Emden based upon intrinsic motivations. Among the selected actors, the study finds some evidence for features of Dark Green Religion while also revealing ongoing anthropocentric orientations as well as hesitations to openly communicate eco-religious worldviews and feelings among peers, indicating a need for further research into the extent and influence of Dark Green Religion among environmentally-engaged actors.

From Religion and Ecology to Dark Green Religion

Taylor's arguments are embedded in a wider academic debate on religion and ecology. This debate has particularly stressed the role of traditional forms of religion (e.g. Christianity, Islam, Buddhism) for addressing environmental challenges. Some of the contributions to this debate see a strong potential for religion in facilitating societal transformations toward more environmental sustainability and suppose a 'greening' process within traditional religions that leads to higher environmental awareness (Clugston and Holt 2012; Gottlieb 2008; Kimmins 1993; Rasmussen 2011; Rolston III 2006; Tucker 2006; Tucker 2008). In particular, they highlight the ability of traditional religions to disseminate pro-environmental values and worldviews--a function that is regarded as crucial for the successful sustainability transitions and that other social spheres such as science and politics cannot assume (Bergmann 2009; Gardner 2003; Tucker 2006:413-414, 416). However, there is lack of empirical research within the religion and ecology debate to underpin these claims. Moreover, the religion and ecology debate has not sufficiently taken into account the potential of alternative, non-traditional forms of religion to shape the environmental attitudes of their 'adherents' and thereby fulfil the aforementioned value-dissemination role.

While most of the contributions in the religion and ecology debate focus on traditional forms of religion, the concept of Dark Green Religion provides an alternative perspective on the relationship between religion and ecology by exploring the underlying religious dimensions of environmentalism. Aside from Taylor, other scholars have highlighted this dimension of environmental worldviews and concepts related to it (e.g. sustainability) (Hedlund-de Witt 2013; Johnston 2014; Nelson 2012; Witt 2016). However, this article focuses specifically on Taylor's elaborations, as they increasingly mark the debates on religion and ecology and provide a useful starting point for empirical explorations.

Taylor suggests that a new world religion is spreading: Dark Green Religion. Followers

of this emerging religion perceive nature as sacred – and therefore worth protecting – and feel strongly connected to it. These perceptions and feelings lead to a new ethic of kinship with nature. Taylor defines this phenomenon as follows:

By dark green religion, I mean religion that considers nature to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care. Dark green religion considers nonhuman species to have worth, regardless of their usefulness to human beings. Such religion expresses and promotes an ethics of kinship between human beings and other life forms. (Taylor 2008:89)

Taylor distinguishes between different subtypes of Dark Green Religion: spiritual animism, naturalistic animism, gaian spirituality, gaian naturalism (Taylor 2010:14–41). Despite their differences, they share some general features. Apart from the abovementioned characteristics – perception of nature as sacred and feelings of belonging to nature – adherents of this religion attribute an intrinsic value to nature that is independent of its value for human beings. Thereby, they abstain from an anthropocentric worldview and believe that, regardless of its services and benefits for human beings, nature has value in itself. This implies an alternative ethic toward nature which Taylor describes as an ethic of kinship with non-human life, transcending the boundaries of humanity and including the well-being of the non-human world into its concerns.

Taylor locates most of the followers of this religion within the ‘environmental milieu’. He defines this milieu as ‘contexts in which environmentally concerned officials, scientists, activists, and other citizens connect with and reciprocally influence one another’ (Taylor 2010:13–14). The notion of the ‘environmental milieu’ draws upon the concept of the ‘cultic milieu’ (Campbell 1972): these milieus consist of groups of individuals that share similar ideas

and are open to the exchange of ideas within these communities while seeking to distinguish themselves from mainstream culture. The exchange of ideas among followers of Dark Green Religion takes place within a 'global environmental milieu', meaning the ideas spread across the boundaries of continents and nations.

Even though they may use religious vocabulary when referring to nature, most people who fit the Dark Green Religion definition would not self-describe as religious and are sometimes even hostile to what they regard as religion (Taylor 2010:124). Therefore, by their social environment as well as by most academic observers, they are likely to be regarded as non-religious actors that primarily relate to areas of social life other than 'religion' (such as politics or civil society). Besides existing in these growing social networks in which these non-religious actors move, Dark Green Religion also spreads via mass media. Taylor illustrates this for different types of media such as institutional reports, art works, theatrical plays, movies, and books, including 'writings in science, philosophy, fiction, and poetry' (Taylor 2010:113). An important channel for the dissemination of these eco-religious worldviews and ethics are popular movies such as 'The Jungle Book', 'The Little Mermaid', and 'Avatar' (Fritz 2012; Taylor 2013). Along with mass-media, important dissemination channels also include museums, biosphere reserves, and zoos (Taylor 2010:119). Through (re)production and dissemination by different actors and institutions, Dark Green Religion steadily evolves in transnational flows of information and spreads rapidly.

However, as there are no central institutions (organizations or basic scriptures) that could standardize it, Dark Green Religion is not fixed. Among individual actors, it becomes manifest in individualized hybrid forms that may integrate, for instance, insights from scientific books, motion pictures, and personal experiences (Taylor 2001). The assumed fluidity of Dark Green Religion fits with the diagnosis of growing religious individualization and 'bricolage', as actors construct their individualized faith-systems by drawing upon different traditions

(Campiche 1993; Hervieu-Léger 2003). By integrating different cultural and religious influences (e.g. belief in energy flows) into individual faith-systems, Dark Green Religion emerges as a manifestation of these tendencies. For understanding the 'religious' dimension of Dark Green Religion, it would be instrumental to know what Taylor defines as religion and, given the longstanding debates about the definition of 'religion', to what tradition of defining religion his concept subscribes. The academic debates about what should be defined as religion and whether the whole term should be abandoned or not has led to a wide array of approaches, including wide and narrow, substantial and functional definitions (Asad 2009; Bergunder 2011; Dobbelaere and Lauwers 1973; Schäfer 2009; Woodhead 2011).

Taylor, however, avoids defining religion and, thereby, avoids outlining whether Dark Green Religion is actually 'religion' along the lines proscribed by other theorists. He avoids the highly embattled academic debates about the definition of religion, stating: 'I am disinterested in patrolling the boundary between what some people count as religion and others do not (...)' (Taylor 2010:124). Instead he prefers a 'flexible definitional strategy' (Taylor 2010:110), referring to family resemblances to religion (Taylor 2010:1–3) and concepts of parareligion/quasi-religion or implicit religion, meaning that some elements of the phenomenon that he describes are also found in religion while others may not be. However, referring to these concepts does not imply that he regards the phenomenon as non-religious (Taylor 2010:110). Therefore, despite using the term Dark Green Religion and thereby explicitly labeling the phenomenon as a religion, he abstains from telling the reader whether it is a 'religion' and what being a 'religion' would imply.

From the viewpoint of empirical researchers interested in exploring the religious dimension of ecological worldviews, the refusal to define the religious nature of Dark Green Religion constitutes a major obstacle. Regarded from a theoretical standpoint, however, Taylor seems to assume that the boundaries of the religious are constantly negotiated in societies. As

the boundaries are fluid and subject to negotiation processes, defining religion means that scholars position themselves in the battles about what religion is and promote a specific standpoint.

For the sake of simplicity, I assume that Taylor regards Dark Green Religions as a religious phenomenon: not only does the labeling of Dark Green Religion indicate this interpretation, but also his assumption that traditional religions compete with these over their religious market shares (Taylor 2004; Taylor 2010:124–25). This raises the question of what type of definition his concept of Dark Green Religion implies. Against the backdrop of predominant definitions that regard some sort of supernatural or transcendence as essential for religion (Luhmann 2000; Riesebrodt 2007; Stark and Finke 2000), Dark Green Religion does not necessarily include a reference to a supernatural. Taylor states:

I see no reason to insist, however, that without supernatural beings there is no religion, for there are many examples around the world where people feel and speak of a ‘spiritual connection’ to nature, or of ‘belonging to’ the earth (mother earth, or even mother ocean), or speaking of the earth as ‘sacred’, without any concomitant confession of supernatural beliefs. (*Taylor 2004:1000*)

As religion is neither bound to traditional institutions and/or faith confessions nor necessarily relating to a supernatural, the concept of Dark Green Religion appears to draw on a wide definition of religion similarly to Thomas Luckmann’s invisible religion (Luckmann 1967; Luckmann 2002) which supposes that religion increasingly becomes manifest in new spiritual forms (e.g. edifying literature, positive thinking in the lyrics of pop music) distinct from traditional institutional religion. Nevertheless, while Luckmann’s ‘invisible religion’ presents a functional definition that regards religion as responsible for addressing different

types of contingencies, Taylor does not subscribe to a functional definition of religion. In contrast, Taylor rather seems to relate what he describes as religion to the use of specific semantics (e.g. ‘sacred’), the expression of feelings of connectedness, and the attribution of intrinsic value to nature. From this perspective, expressions of these semantics, feelings, and value attributions are indicators of ‘religion’ and, when related to nature, more specifically of Dark Green Religion.

Taylor lists many examples of Dark Green Religion from literature, government reports (such as the Brundtland report), magazines, movies, theatrical plays, as well as outdoor recreation practices such as surfing. His arguments are based on long-term field work, including interviews, analysis of literature, movies and plays, as well as his own experiences visiting nature reserves and participating in adventure sports, such as surfing. In a similar vein, other scholars have shown, through empirical research, dimensions of this emergent eco-religiosity among environmental activists (Becci and Monnot 2016; Hedlund-de Witt 2013; Witt 2016). Often, empirical research focuses on radical communities with conceptions of life beyond the social mainstream. But it is not clear to what extent Dark Green Religion becomes manifest among actors not organizing in radical communities and moving in more conventional social contexts. Such a context is the transition toward more sustainable energy systems in Western Europe. Pioneering actors in these processes are usually not embedded in radical communities set apart from mainstream society, but frequently ‘ordinary’ citizens who assume leadership roles in these socio-technological transformations. Therefore, the following sections will explore leading actors in an urban energy transition in northwestern Germany.

Methods

This study forms part of a larger, completed research project about the energy transition in Emden. Emden is a harbor city in northwestern Germany with approximately 50,000

inhabitants. Within the region of northwestern Germany, Emden has the reputation of being a pioneering city in the field of energy transition (Klagge and Brocke 2012). The city has set the ambitious goal to reduce its CO₂ emission by 50% by 2030, as compared to levels in 1990 (Stadt Emden 2010). To meet this goal, the city administration and Emden's public utility have undertaken programs to improve the energy efficiency of public buildings and reduce the energy consumption of private households. Moreover, the city has strongly invested in renewables, in particular wind energy, restructuring its energy production. As such, vast wind farms mark the outskirts of Emden. Regional businesses related to the wind and solar energy sector, academic researchers from the local university of applied sciences, local politicians, and some civil society organizations contribute to these processes (Huber, Köhrsen and Mattes 2013; Koehrsen 2017; Mattes, Huber and Koehrsen 2015). Some groundbreakers have initiated the local transition processes while the ongoing transformation processes are based on the strong engagement of different types of actors in the city (e.g. public administrators, politicians, businesses, researchers, and citizen initiatives). This study explores the perceptions of nature among these actors and seeks to determine whether features of Dark Green Religion are apparent among them. While a previous study has found that traditional religious actors in the form of the three predominant local Christian denominations—the Reformed Church, the Lutheran Church, and the Catholic Church—have participated only to a minor extent in Emden's energy transition (Koehrsen 2015), this study focuses on the role of eco-religious worldviews among 'non-religious' actors.

In this research project, I conducted a total of 37 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the leading actors in Emden's energy transition. Considering the most relevant actors from different social spheres, this sample represents a comprehensive overview of the most important actors in this pioneering transition city. While most of these actors show a pragmatic stance, pursuing specific gains from their engagement in the transition (such as political votes,

economic benefits, reputation), this study focuses on the small proportion of actors who show a strong intrinsic motivation for their environmental engagement, perceiving the protection of the environment as a goal in itself. This sampling strategy was used because these actors are more likely to exhibit features of Dark Green Religion (e.g. attachment to nature, rejection of anthropocentrism) than those working or campaigning for environmental sustainability for mostly opportunistic reasons (Hedlund-de Witt 2012). Based on this criterion, nine interview partners from the original sample were contacted. Six of them participated in a second round of in-depth interviews, representing an important share of the leading actors in Emden's energy transitions that are strongly, intrinsically motivated. Some of these actors are pioneers of the energy transition while others have put significant efforts in this process. They are related to different social spheres: the business sector, administration, citizen initiatives, and politics. In order to guarantee their anonymity, their names have been changed.

Interviews focused on their nature perceptions, motivations, ethics, and practices relating to nature. In order to not influence the interviewee and trigger religion-related answers, questions relating to the religiosity of the interviewee were introduced only at the end of the interview.

Dark Green Religion in an Urban Energy Transition

The following paragraphs describe the eco-religious tendencies among the actors interviewed. In terms of their environmental involvement, the interview partners are all strongly engaged in the low carbon transition of their city and, to varying extents, have had a stake in the ongoing transformation process. Most of them work in professional positions which allow them to actively participate in the transition processes. Moreover, in their spare time, they seek to provide a good example with their lifestyles and, in some occasions, are involved with associations and/or citizen initiatives related to sustainability. However, at the same time, they all critically assert about themselves that they are not 100% 'Ökos' (environmentalists) when

it comes to their lifestyles, referring, for instance, to the fact that they own cars and sometimes travel by plane. As such, they are not radical environmentalists but very much embedded in the typical lifestyle routines of most citizens in this region.

Nature as Sacred?

Asked about their associations and concepts of nature, interviewees described nature as entangled with the world of human beings: humans are regarded as a part of nature. For instance, Paul protested that the notion of 'nature' as environment ('Umwelt') creates an artificial distinction between humans and nature that does not exist. At the same time, he highlighted the 'incredible wonder' of nature, using the following adjectives to describe it: 'fantastic', 'multifarious', 'incredible', and 'astounding'.

Interviewees repeatedly stated that it is difficult to put 'nature' in words. It appears as something 'ungraspable', and 'inexplicable' that transcends humans' cognitive capacities. Given its 'incredibility', interviewees marvel at nature. The marveling of nature frequently occurs in practices that will be described below.

Describing its 'incredibility' and 'inexplicability' already indicates that nature may assume a religious dimension for the interviewees. This dimension becomes even more evident in the use of religious semantics such as creation, creator, God, spirituality, meaning of life, and sin.

However, did the interviewees perceive nature as 'sacred', as Taylor suggests? At the end of each interview, I asked the respondents whether they regard nature as sacred. In German, I used the term 'heilig'. While 'heilig' is the term that in spoken German most matches the English 'sacred', it may receive different connotations, as also the interviewees' responses show. Besides 'sacred', 'heilig' may be translated with the English terms 'holy', 'blessed', or 'saintly'. Moreover, individuals may use the term for things such as personal possessions that

are not necessarily 'religious', but which they fervently adore and which should, according to them, stay intact or even untouched. Yet, even when used in this way, the term maintains its religious connotation, as the attribution of value to the given object consists in considering it as if it were something sacred: the object becomes to some extent deified by its observer. As such, when interviewees describe nature as 'heilig', they do not necessarily consider nature in itself as something supernatural or strongly connected to a God, but insinuate that they admire it in a way in which religious actors would admire the supernatural and/or perceive it as something that should remain unharmed.

Given its interpretative flexibility, the interviewees disagreed about whether the term 'heilig' could be appropriately applied to nature. Some interviewees rejected using the term 'sacred' for nature and substituted it with other terms that appeared less religiously charged, attributing terms such as 'wonderful', and 'fantastic' to nature. For instance, Andrea approved of the idea that nature is sacred but regarded the term as not having the right connotation. Instead she preferred using 'meaningful', 'spiritual', 'mysterious'. Dagmar also said that she would prefer other terms such as 'sublime' or the 'all-embracing', but at the same time approved of the idea that nature should be 'sacred' in terms of ethical worthiness for protection. In our interview, Dagmar stated:

Maybe it is sacred in the sense that one is not allowed to destroy it. But not like a sanctuary or something like that. It should be sacred to the individual, maybe.

Unlike the aforementioned actors, Edward stated that nature has sacred qualities for him and related this to his feelings when he experiences nature on the sea.

Interviewer: Is nature something sacred for you?

Edward: Yes, it has something sacred for me when I am on the boat on the water and see the sun set, then I think ‘yes, you are also only a very small light on this world’. Or it is totally overwhelming for you. Yes, or when you feel the force of the waves, the wind and so forth.

Jonathan, in contrast, regarded nature not as sacred and rejected the term, but instead described it as ‘vulnerable’, ‘worthy of protection’, and ‘unconditionally worthy of preservation’. At the same time, he experienced nature as ‘fascinating’ and stated that there is more behind it that we cannot observe.

When referring to the potential ‘sacredness’ of nature, again, he referenced the incomprehensibility of nature and his fascination for its appearance. Although disagreeing on the term ‘sacred’, all interviewees experienced nature at least as something that remains inexplicable for human beings. However, it was unclear whether the ‘inexplicability’ of nature necessarily involved a spiritual quality for all of them. While not necessarily agreeing on the spiritual dimension, the interviewees agreed on nature’s ‘sacredness’ in ethical—rather than spiritual—terms: nature is experienced as ‘sacred’ in the sense that it must be protected.

However, when it comes to the spiritual dimension, some of the interviewees regarded nature as God or another form spiritual being. Peter, for instance, stated:

God for me is nature. Yes. That is for me this interplay, the miraculous interplay of nature. What makes life such a pleasure for me is this magnificent miracle. How it works in itself. And how it goes on and on and never stops. I have extreme respect for this. And I am powerless, because I can’t influence it, and I don’t want to. But I am thankful for it, that it is like it is. And that is God for me.

Dagmar, in contrast, did not believe in a 'God' but in the 'the overall whole'. Therefore, she used the notion of 'Mother Nature'.

Also, I don't believe in nothing, but it is... I don't believe in a God. And I rather believe in the, in quotations marks, the overall whole, the Mother Nature thing. This I rather believe, that there is something like that, but I can't imagine it as a God or something. There is something all-embracing, such an all-embracing fact, somehow.

However, she refuted the idea of 'mother nature' in the next moment, but continued to hold that nature has a consciousness. The hesitation of Dagmar illustrates that the actors interviewed were not clear about what categories to apply when speaking about 'nature' in their own worldviews. The lack of clear-cut categories relates to the absence of communication about these topics in their social environment. Interviewees stated that was the first time that they had spoken about this topic.

Religious Bricolage

The religious bricolage that Taylor identified as characteristic of Dark Green Religion can also be found in the interviews, as some of the interviewees connected their feelings and perceptions to nature with Christian concepts. A rejection of traditional religion and its institutions, as supposed by Taylor, became manifest only in two interviews (Paul and Dagmar). Nevertheless, even these interviewees used references related to traditional religion to describe nature (the term 'creation', for example). Three interviewees were affiliated with the major Christian Churches in the city and practiced their faith to varying degrees, while one unaffiliated

interviewee was planning to become a formal member of Protestantism. In two cases, interviewees stated that they prayed on a regular basis. Interestingly, interviewees tended to have a critical perception of the Bible: in particular, those who prayed on a regular basis regarded it rather as an assemblage of stories that helps people in their daily lives and allows them to assume responsibility toward others. None of the actors interviewed solely committed to the worldview of a single religious tradition. Instead, they assembled Christian concepts with their concepts of nature, creating their own eco-religious worldviews.

Edward, for instance, described himself as religious. Speaking about his religiosity he referred to the personal equilibrium of humans ('inneres Gleichgewicht'). He believed that all the Gods in the different faith traditions refer to the same thing. God would provide human beings with stability. Andrea described herself as 'a bit religious' and referred to it as a 'fuzzy matter of attitudes'. She wanted to get baptized in a Protestant church, as her family is Protestant and she is socialized in a Christian way. She described herself as committed to Christian ethics relating them to 'respect', 'forgiveness', and 'love'. God is nothing concrete for her.

Interviewer: You have used the word God, what would God be for you?

Andrea: An idea.

Interviewer: An idea?

Andrea: Yes. Nothing concrete. So, there is, let's say, that is for me more an idea, or something that can give one a direction ... but there is also nothing wrong, there is also nothing right. A bracket maybe. A bracket that brings all together and

provides a meaning.

Eschatology and Anthropocentrism

The Christian heritage becomes to some extent also visible in the apocalyptic scenarios that interviewees sketch. Paul believed that humanity is going to destroy itself and nature. Andrea feared that nature will be devastated and the Gulf Stream will stop, causing Siberian weather in Northern Germany. Jonathan stated that Emden as a low-lying city is particularly threatened by climate change. Negative, apocalyptic visions of the future drive the activities of these pioneering actors.

Although perceiving nature as worth protecting, the interviewees described their own engagement and the need for change from the viewpoint of potential threats to humanity. This somewhat challenges Taylor's assumption that followers of Dark Green Religion would reject anthropocentrism. Asked about the motivations for their engagement, all interviewees referred to the future of humanity: if things continue on the same pathway, then this implies constraining the life of future generations or even the destruction of their basis for existence. Even when regarding nature as being in itself worthy of preservation, actors perceived their activities through the lens of nature's relevance for humanity.

Paul for instance, stated that his engagement was related to the question of what he will leave for the coming generations and criticized the ruthless exploitation of resources for the sake of higher living standards. He regarded the protection of environment as a responsibility toward his children and grandchildren.

But I have to, for me, I have to be able to look my children and grandchildren in the eye. And then say that I have done my part that you will have a good life.

Similarly, Jonathan stated that it is important to maintain the world in good shape for coming generations, and Edward said that he felt obliged toward his daughter and grandchildren.

Green Ethics and Mission

However, when it comes to ethics, some criticism of anthropocentrism became manifest and the term 'respect' appeared frequently in relation to nature. Criticizing humans who often act in an ignorant and egoistic fashion toward nature, interviewees asked for its respectful treatment. Paul, for instance, argued as follows:

Interviewer: How should humans, according to you, behave towards nature?

Paul: First of all, with respect. And I always had to learn that this is the Alpha and the Omega of the relationships in which we live.

In order to reduce negative impacts on nature, some interviewees stated, human interventions in nature should be minimized. Arguing that humans should seek to understand the needs of nature instead of approaching it from the perspective of their own needs, Andrea distanced herself from an anthropocentric approach to nature:

Interviewer: How should humans, according to you, behave towards nature?

Andrea: Attentive in the first place. First, not now to determine but to watch first what nature is doing and what it is and what it needs. Before one gives any big advice. And then, when one has slowly sensed it, then one should be attentive to all

things. Thus, look where are you stepping, how loud am I, what kind of curious plant is this and so forth. Thus, attentive. Thus, considerate, respectful, and curious.

She argued for respectful treatment of nature that acknowledges the needs of nature and does not place the needs of human beings over those of nature.

Relating to peers, interviewees sought to provide positive examples with their own lifestyles. However, when it came to actively convincing others, interviewees disagreed: Peter, for instance, actively persuaded his peers to change their lifestyles, while Andrea stated that she strove not 'to evangelize' (in German: 'missionieren') others with her views. She said,

I do not try to evangelize. I don't often succeed in this, but I hate when someone evangelizes me with something. I don't evangelize. I just behave as I behave. And some recognize in it something like an educational task that I would do it on purpose. But I don't do it on purpose, but when it is about preventing things, then I stand up in a severe manner and that is like that. But I wouldn't say to someone 'you have to do this' or 'you have now to do that'.

Nature Practices

Nature is experienced as 'marvelous', 'fantastic' and 'inexplicable'. Practices of marveling at nature nurture this perception and are important for interviewees' relationships with nature, as they allow them to 'experience' nature and to feel part of it. Feeling close to nature and experiencing it is basic for many interviewee's pro-environmental views. For instance, Andrea explained:

It is actually the most important thing in that we are embedded, as humans. Thus,

I, let's say we are simply part of nature and the more we are separated from it, thus also simply by space or so on, the worse it is for us. Thus, when I surround myself with plastic, then I find it is... let's say one can see it as a bit esoteric or so. But somehow like Mother Nature and she belongs to me and everything that separates me from her makes me feel unwell. That is very personal. (...) Yes, the closer one is to nature, I think, the more connected, the more right is it, because this is one's place. Everything else is an artificial separation.

Therefore, interviewees searched for proximity to nature in their spare time and hobbies, such as riding bikes, gardening, trekking, and sailing. Specific practices of observing ('anschauen') nature are important. The home garden assumes a strong importance for them, as it allowed them to marvel at the beauty and complexity of nature on their own doorsteps. Dagmar and Paul mentioned, for example, that they experienced nature by observing the bees in their gardens.

Besides these daily practices of relating to nature, there are other outstanding nature experiences that allowed interviewees to feel connected with nature. These are specific moments that some of the interviewees experienced under certain circumstances and they sought to reproduce from time to time. For example, Andrea mentioned sitting for hours in a shelter when hunting. Edward explained that he feels one with nature when viewing the sunset on the sea:

A sunset on the boat that is undefinable, that is not possible to describe with words. Because this is simply beautiful, even if you are sometimes totally alone, then one is one with nature. Then I don't know how to explain it.

Activities of experiencing and marveling at nature seem to form rituals in which they celebrate and practice their relationship to nature. These rituals reproduce and strengthen interviewees' feelings of connectedness to nature and their eco-religious worldviews.

Interviewees also approached these rituals from the perspective of the benefits for them and thereby again exhibited a rather anthropocentric point of view. Peter, for instance, stated that he benefits from practices in which he experiences nature and its energy:

I can stand for hours at the water of the Northern Sea and just observe the waves, listening to the sound, feeling, there is such an energy in there, for me. I can't measure this energy, I can't measure it in amp, no that is an energy, that is... there sparks a force that I believe is influencing me and that does me good. I can't measure this and verify. Someone who does not agree with me says I only imagine all this. Yes. Then I just do this, then I imagine this. But it does me good.

Dissemination of Eco-Religious World Views

In discussing important channels through which Dark Green Religions disseminate, Taylor mentions books, movies and other types of mass-media (Taylor 2010:95-99,113). When asked about which books, movies or public figures have influenced their perspective on nature, most interviewees regarded none as having deeply shaped their views. Only Dagmar said that she was influenced by some books such as *Collapse* by Jared Diamond. Other interviewees named some books, movies or public figures that they liked: Peter mentioned Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, Jonathan named the book *Ecotopia*, and Paul referred to the musician Sting's record 'One World One Voice'. Jonathan and Edward mentioned several German politicians (including Klaus Töpfer and Hans-Josef Fell) and the German journalist and author Franz Alt as prominent actors with whose positions they identified. Asked about what shaped

their views on nature, interviewees did not refer to mass media but rather to concrete events such as the Chernobyl nuclear accident, Germany's car-free Sundays during the first oil crisis in 1973, anti-nuclear protests, and personal events, including the births of their children, as well as intense contact with nature during childhood and, in some instances, their parental household.

Interestingly, interviewees described the interview as the first opportunity they had been given to reflect with another person about their perceptions of nature. Exchange about these topics appears to be highly restricted and marginalized. As such, Peter stated that he would not even dare to speak with his closest family members about his views and feelings toward nature. Fearing negative reactions among peers, he asked for the interview to be conducted with strict anonymity. Interviewees seemed to regard their own views as unacceptable among peers and feared stigma in their work and private environment.

Interviewees also described that their perspectives have not significantly changed over time, thereby implying that more recent information influxes from books, movies, or other elements of popular culture had little impact on their views and feelings toward nature. Rather, changes had occurred in their level of engagement. While they described themselves as having been less engaged in their early adulthood, the later rise in their environmental engagement was frequently related to new professional positions or social networks that offered them the opportunity to translate their worldviews into action.

When engaging with others, communications in these circles (the 'environmental milieu') is usually relegated to practical issues (such as project designs) and not to general questions regarding views and emotions toward nature. Therefore, the exchange about topics associated with Dark Green Religion seemed to be more constrained than suggested by Taylor. If direct communication about these topics is, indeed, restricted and mass media has only a limited impact, the eco-religious worldviews cannot expand as freely as Taylor describes, and

the limited channels through which they spread remain to be more thoroughly explored.

Discussion

Taylor argues that Dark Green Religions are increasingly spreading and become particularly manifest in the 'environmental milieu'. Dark Green Religion includes perceptions of nature as 'sacred', strong feelings of connectedness to nature, kinship ethics toward nature, and the attribution of intrinsic value to nature, thereby renouncing anthropocentrism.

This study of actors who were strongly engaged in the energy transition of a Northern German city found some evidence for what Taylor describes as Dark Green Religion. The actors used, to some extent, religious semantics to describe 'nature' and to express feelings of connectedness to it. Nature practices seemed to be important for these actors to reproduce their feelings of connectedness and their views of nature. They allowed these actors to 'marvel at nature', feel 'at one with nature' and 'receive its energies'. Criticizing the egoistic and ignorant treatment of nature, the interviewees called for an ethic of respect toward nature.

However, the study shows no clear evidence for the assumed rejection of anthropocentrism and the supposed expansion channels of eco-religious worldviews in this particular environmentally-engaged city. Describing their activities as motivated by their concerns about future generations, interviewees deployed anthropocentric reasoning in justifying their environmental engagement. Moreover, the expansion of their worldviews appears to be more restricted than suggested by Taylor: there is no open communication about views and feelings toward nature in the peer-groups in which the actors studied here move. Rather these actors seem to avoid this type of communication.

As pioneering actors hesitate to speak with their closest peers about their religious views and feelings toward nature, Dark Green Religion, viewed from these insights, seems to concern hidden sentiments and views that people may feel embarrassed of, rather than creating an open

commitment. The low acceptance of these topics points toward the marginalization of religion/cosmologies and emotions in energy transitions. As energy transitions are often framed as technological and economic transformation processes, there is little space for these topics which are likely to appear as irrelevant or even counterproductive. Even more so, public commitment to some sort of eco-religion that is not officially accepted could undermine the credibility and ascribed rationality of pioneering actors.

The marginalization of religion may also be the reason why it is barely tackled in ongoing academic debates on sustainability transitions. On the one hand, as a hidden and marginalized dimension it becomes barely visible to researchers (Koehrsen 2018). On the other hand, with technology-focused approaches dominating the debates and research agendas, other dimensions of sustainability transition that seem to have little relationship with the ongoing technological transformations also barely come into sight (Shove and Walker 2007; Sovacool 2014).

Religious studies (including sociology of religion) and, in particular, the debate on religion and ecology can help to uncover the roles of religion in these processes. In order to do so, it is not only necessary to consider traditional religious actors and worldviews but also eco-religious worldviews and feelings among ‘non-religious’ actors (for the nature religion of the ‘nones’, see also Shibley 2011). Taylor’s Dark Green Religion highlights this dimension and thereby indicates that religion may become manifest in sustainability transitions other than in its traditional forms. This study underpins this view: while traditional religion in the form of local Christian Churches plays only a minor role in the urban energy transition, eco-religious worldviews and feelings appear to predispose some of the pioneering actors to undertake their transition activities.

To explore the importance of religion in sustainability transitions, more empirical research is needed. By providing evidence for the roles of religion in these processes, research

from religious studies could strongly contribute to the academic debates on sustainability transitions and help to widen the prevalent perceptions of these processes (Koehrsen 2018). In-depth research on the ground can help to determine whether and what type of eco-religious worldviews environmentally engaged actors hold and in what way these influence their activities. Additionally, research about the socialization of these actors, investigating what led them to evolve these views and feelings toward nature, could help to further evolve the concept of Dark Green Religion and create a nuanced picture of actors' eco-religious worldviews. Finally, quantitative surveys may explore the prevalence of these worldviews among populations in specific regions.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the interview partners for their participation in this project, to Vera Schaffer and Sven Holzer for their assistance with the transcription of the interviews, to Helen Gilroy for language assistance, to University of Basel's Faculty of Theology and the French environmental agency ADEME for their financial support to conduct the field research, to editors and reviewers of JSRNC for their comments and to the organizers and participants of the workshop 'Towards a 'Spiritualization' of Ecology?' in Lausanne in spring 2017 for their remarks on a first version of this article.

References

- Asad, Talal. 2009. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*: JHU Press.
- Becci, Irene, and Christophe Monnot. 2016. "Spiritualité et religion: Nouveaux carburants vers la transition énergétique ?" *Histoire, monde et cultures religieuses* 40(4):93–109.

- doi:10.3917/hmc.040.0093.
- Bergmann, Sigurd. 2009. "Climate Change Changes Religion." *Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology* 63(2):98–118. doi:10.1080/00393380903345057.
- Bergunder, Michael. 2011. "Was ist Religion? Kulturwissenschaftliche Überlegungen zum Gegenstand der Religionswissenschaft." *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 19(1-2):3–55.
- Campbell, Colin. 1972. "The cult, the cultic milieu and secularization." Pp. 119–36, in *A sociological yearbook of religion in Britain*, edited by M. Hill. London: SCM-Canterbury Press.
- Campiche, Roland J. 1993. "Individualisation du croire et recomposition de la religion." *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 81(janvier-mars):117–31.
- Clugston, Richard, and Steve Holt, editors. 2012. *Exploring Synergies Between Faith Values and Education for Sustainable Development*. San José: Earth Charter International.
- Dobbelaere, Karel, and Jan Lauwers. 1973. "Definition of Religion- A Sociological Critique." *Social Compass* 20(4):535–51. doi:10.1177/003776867302000403.
- Fritz, Justin. 2012. "Environmentalism and the " Ecological Indian" in Avatar: A Visual Analysis." *The Arbutus Review* 3(1):67–90.
- Gardner, Gary T. 2003. "Engaging Religion in the Quest for a Sustainable World." Pp. 152–75, In *State of the World, 2003: A Worldwatch Institute Report on Progress Toward a Sustainable Society*, edited by Worldwatch Institute. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Gottlieb, Roger. 2008. "You Gonna Be Here Long? Religion and Sustainability." *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 12(2):163–78. doi:10.1163/156853508X359967.
- Hedlund-de Witt, Annick. 2012. "Exploring Worldviews and Their Relationships to Sustainable Lifestyles: Towards a New Conceptual and Methodological Approach." *Ecological Economics* 84:74–83. doi:10.1016/j.ecolecon.2012.09.009.
- Hedlund-de Witt, Annick. 2013. "Pathways to Environmental Responsibility: A Qualitative

- Exploration of the Spiritual Dimension of Nature Experience.” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 7(2). doi:10.1558/jsrnc.v7i2.154.
- Hervieu-Léger, Danièle. 2003. “Individualism, the Validation of Faith, and the Social Nature of Religion in Modernity.” Pp. 161–75 in *Blackwell companions to religion, vol. 2, The Blackwell companion to sociology of religion*, edited by R. K. Fenn. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.
- Huber, Andreas, Jens Köhrsen, and Jannika Mattes. 2013. “Towards a Better Understanding of Local Reorganization Processes – Empirical Findings from Two Case Studies.” *Proceedings of the ECEEE 2013 summer study* :271–82.
- Johnston, L. F. 2014. “Sustainability as a Global Faith?: The Religious Dimensions of Sustainability and Personal Risk.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82(1):47–69. doi:10.1093/jaarel/lft056.
- Kimmins, J. P. 1993. “Ecology, environmentalism and green religion.” *The Forestry Chronicle* 69(3):285–89. doi:10.5558/tfc69285-3.
- Klagge, B., and T. Brocke. 2012. “Decentralized Electricity Generation from Renewable Sources as a Chance for Local Economic Development: a Qualitative Study of Two Pioneer Regions in Germany.” *Energy, Sustainability and Society* 2(5):2–9 (<http://www.energysustainsoc.com/content/pdf/2192-0567-2-5.pdf> (accessed 19/12/2913)).
- Koehrsen, Jens. 2015. “Does Religion Promote Environmental Sustainability? - Exploring the Role of Religion in Local Energy Transitions.” *Social Compass* 62(3):296–310. doi:10.1177/0037768615587808.
- Koehrsen, Jens. 2017. “Boundary Bridging Arrangements: A Boundary Work Approach to Local Energy Transitions.” *Sustainability* 9(424). doi:10.3390/su9030424.
- Koehrsen, Jens. 2018. “Religious Agency in Sustainability Transitions: Between Experimentation, Upscaling, and Regime Support.” *Environmental Innovation and Societal*

- Transitions* 27:4–15. doi:10.1016/j.eist.2017.09.003.
- Luckmann, Thomas. 1967. *The invisible religion: The problem of religion in modern society*: Macmillan.
- Luckmann, Thomas. 2002. “Schrumpfende Transzendenzen, expandierende Religion.” Pp. 139–55, in *Wissen und Gesellschaft: Ausgewählte Aufsätze 1981-2002*, edited by T. Luckmann. Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft.
- Luhmann, Niklas. 2000. *Die Religion der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
- Markard, Jochen, Rob Raven, and Bernhard Truffer. 2012. “Sustainability Transitions: an Emerging Field of Research and Its Prospects.” *Research Policy* 41(6):955–67. doi:10.1016/j.respol.2012.02.013.
- Mattes, Jannika, Andreas Huber, and Jens Koehrsen. 2015. “Energy Transitions in Small-Scale Regions – What We Can Learn from a Regional Innovation Systems Perspective.” *Energy Policy* 78:255–64. doi:10.1016/j.enpol.2014.12.011.
- Nelson, Robert H. 2012. “Economics and Environmentalism: Belief Systems at Odds.” *The Independent Review* 17(1):5–17.
- Rasmussen, Larry L. 2011. “Energy: the Challenges to and from Religion.” *Zygon* 46(4):985–1002. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9744.2011.01224.x.
- Riesebrodt, Martin. 2007. *Cultus und Heilsversprechen: Eine Theorie der Religionen*. München: Beck.
- Rolston III, Holmes. 2006. “Science and Religion in the Face of the Environmental Crisis.” Pp. 376–97, In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, edited by R. S. Gottlieb: Oxford University Press.
- Schäfer, Heinrich. 2009. “Zum Religionsbegriff in der Analyse von Identitätskonflikten: Einige sozialwissenschaftliche und theologische Erwägungen.” *epd-Dokumentation* (5):6–16.

- Shibley, Mark A. 2011. "Sacred Nature: Earth-Based Spirituality as Popular Religion in the Pacific Northwest." *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture* 5(2).
- Shove, Elizabeth, and Gordon Walker. 2007. "CAUTION!: Transitions Ahead: Politics, Practice, and Sustainable Transition Management." *Environment and Planning A* 39(4):763–70. doi:10.1068/a39310.
- Sovacool, Benjamin K. 2014. "What Are We Doing Here? Analyzing Fifteen Years of Energy Scholarship and Proposing a Social Science Research Agenda." *Energy Research & Social Science* 1:1–29. doi:10.1016/j.erss.2014.02.003.
- Stadt Emden. 2010. "Integriertes Kommunales Klimaschutzkonzept." Retrieved September 20, 2014 (https://www.emden.de/fileadmin/media/stadtemden/PDF/FB_300/FD_362/Energie_Klima/klimaschutzkonzept_gesamt_endversion.pdf).
- Stark, Rodney, and Roger Finke. 2000. *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press
(<http://www.gbv.de/dms/hbz/toc/ht013231921.pdf>).
- Taylor, Bron. 2001. "Earth and Nature-Based Spirituality (Part I): From Deep Ecology to Radical Environmentalism." *Religion* 31(2):175–93. doi:10.1006/reli.2000.0256.
- Taylor, Bron. 2004. "A green future for religion?" *Futures* 36(9):991–1008.
- Taylor, Bron. 2008. "From the Ground Up:: Dark Green Religion and the Environmental Future." Pp. 89–107, In *Ecology and the Environment: Perspectives from the Humanities*, edited by D. K. Swearer: Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, Bron. 2010. *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*: Univ of California Press.
- Taylor, Bron. 2013. *Avatar and Nature Spirituality*: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press.
- Tucker, Mary E. 2006. "Religion and Ecology: Survey of the Field." Pp. 398–418, In *The*

Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology, edited by R. S. Gottlieb: Oxford University Press.

Tucker, Mary E. 2008. "World Religions, the Earth Charter, and Sustainability." *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 12(2):115–28. doi:10.1163/156853508X359930.

Witt, Joseph D. 2016. *Religion and Resistance in Appalachia: Faith and the Fight Against Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining*: University Press of Kentucky.

Woodhead, Linda. 2011. "Five concepts of religion." *International Review of Sociology—Revue Internationale de Sociologie* 21(1):121–43.