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**Special Issue Introduction:  
Toward a 'Spiritualization' of Ecology?  
Sociological Perspectives from Francophone Contexts**

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*Introduction*

In recent decades, 'spirituality' has begun to play an increasingly prominent role in public discourses that aim to promote sustainability, to mobilize motivational resources necessary to face climate change, or to consider humans' relation to earth and to nature.<sup>1</sup> Such public discourses

1. See, for instance, the publication of the United Nations Environment Program on the *Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity* (Posey 1999).

highlight how the human/environment nexus is not a purely technical issue, but an intimate and complex relation containing transcendent dimensions.<sup>2</sup> The association of ecology and spirituality is, however, not entirely new.

Romantic critiques of industrialization developed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were oftentimes premised on alternative conceptions of 'spirituality', suggesting that a distant, authentic, wild, and mysterious 'nature' would counterbalance the cold economic market rationale driving rises in pollution. Such spiritualized views of nature were, however, pushed aside from the 1950s onwards. Ecology was developed as an academic—and therefore secular—set of disciplines understood as 'environmental sciences'. In addition, green political parties and philosophical movements emerging during the 1960s favoured an environmentalist posture that dwelled on resource management and strived for cultural and institutional reforms. From the 1970s onwards, the publication of major texts in anglophone countries, such as James Lovelock's 'Gaia hypothesis' (2000), brought naturalistic ecological and holistic religious representations closer. As noted by Bron Taylor (2010), innovative sets of naturalistic and supranaturalistic *deep ecological* worldviews became entangled and circulated globally.

Such developments occurred with a different temporality in the francophone world. With regard to linguistic, political, and cultural specificities, francophone scholars have considered the ecology/religion nexus differently than, for example, the members of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture (ISSRNC). In this special issue, we present several studies carried out by francophone scholars. Each contribution points to a current process of 'spiritualization' of ecology that connects with, and complements, current international debates.

We identify two major factors that characterize the francophone scholarly debate, especially in the social sciences, with respect to the study of the religion/ecology nexus. One factor is the modality of reception of Lynn White's text in the francophone context. As pointed out by Swiss philosopher and environmental activist Jacques Grinevald, in 'France and in Catholic countries more generally, the reception of Lynn White's thesis has not been as loud as it was in the USA' (Grinevald 2010: 55).

The second factor is grounded in francophone academic and disciplinary partitions. An interdisciplinary field for the scientific study of religion and ecology emerged only recently out of difficult exchanges

2. For instance, the World Commission on Protected Areas includes spiritual values in their considerations (cf. Lázaro-Marín et al. 2021: 27).

between disciplines usually conceived as methodologically antithetical, such as sociology, theology, political ecology, philosophy, ethics, and anthropology. In this introduction, we can only briefly sketch the emergence of these interdisciplinary involvements. We then elaborate on why the study of the ‘spiritualization of ecology’ constitutes an important research agenda to pursue. Finally, we introduce the four texts included in this special issue, each of which is based on a unique combination of empirical findings and theoretical argumentation, suggesting that the ‘spiritualization of ecology’ bears many locally and historically grounded attributes.

*Triggers for the Study of the Religion/Ecology Nexus  
in Francophone Academia*

A first translation of Lynn White’s essay into French was published in 1974 as an appendix to Francis Schaeffer’s book *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology* (1970). Francis Schaeffer, a conservative evangelical author, was active at that time in a Christian community situated in the French part of Switzerland. The book served to ground an evangelical critique of so-called modern rationalism. The book’s circulation remained limited and did not reach a wider audience.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the systematic scientific study of the ecology/religion nexus that began to develop during 1990s within the fields of sociology, theology, political philosophy, and ethics engaged mainly with a variety of other sources.<sup>4</sup>

Within the sociology of religion, the research by Danièle Hervieu-Léger, one of France’s leading sociologists of religion, raised the issue. In 1993, she edited a book featuring texts by renowned authors, including Anglophones Catherine Albanese and James Beckford. Among the contributions, only Hervieu-Léger mentioned Lynn White when referring to the US context. Although her main argument was not inspired by White’s thesis *per se*, she explicitly developed an idea resembling White’s notion that worldviews have an overall influence on human activity and on the social organizations they co-configure. For Hervieu-Léger, both religious and ecological worldviews are concerned with ‘nature’ and ‘humankind’, and confront the challenges posed by a modern *ethos* that

3. Lynn White approved only Jacques Grinevald’s French translation published in 1984. In 2019, the Presses Universitaires de France (PUF) published White’s essay on its own.

4. For a detailed discussion, see Becci et al. (2021), parts of which are reproduced—after having been revised and translated—in this section.

fosters 'disenchantment'. She offers an insightful analysis that points to two key aspects of the religion and ecology debate: first, (modern) 'ecological protest' is shown to frame religious traditions as being 'excessively anthropocentric'. Secondly, the ecological movement encapsulates a 'religious and/or spiritual protest against the very nature of modernity' (Hervieu-Léger 1993: 11, our translation). The publication stressed the necessity of connecting sociological reflections on religion and ecology in a comprehensive manner to the study of modern (post)industrial societies (Beckford 1993: 249). As Beckford writes in the postface, the ecology/religion nexus should not be limited to world religions but should instead be linked to broader social theory. Some sociologists of religion have heeded his words (Beckford 1993). In 1995, the theme of the 23<sup>rd</sup> conference of the International Society for the Sociology of Religion (ISSR), held in Québec (Canada), was 'The Regulation by Religion of Nature and Body'. Some of the papers presented were published two years later in a thematic issue of the journal *Social Compass*.<sup>5</sup> Although these publications were of high quality and written in French, they had little influence on European francophone social scientific debates.

In France, the authors who had a major impact on debates about ecology and what we would, from a contemporary perspective, consider as 'spirituality', were actually philosophers working within the traditions of Marxism and psychoanalysis. Félix Guattari advanced arguments in favor of what he called an 'ecosophy' (Guattari 1989),<sup>6</sup> a notion close to Arne Næss's *deep ecology* first developed in 1973, but translated into French only three decades later. Guattari does not refer to Næss and does not elaborate on any transcendental dimensions. With its strong immanent accent, Guattari's view echoed within leftist movements as an alternative and subversive cultural approach to societal issues.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to Arne Næss's *deep ecology* (Næss 1989), Guattari's *ecosophy* avoided any associations with spiritually or religiously engaged actors. Indeed, this aligned with the French countercultural intellectuals' attitude during the mobilizations of May 1968 and an *ethos* opposing religious institutions and authorities perceived as limiting individual

5. As in the United States, most scholarly attention was given to what was called the 'greening of religions' (Vaillancourt and Cousineau 1997). In the 1990s, francophone sociological publications on religion and ecology mostly came from Canadian authors (Tessier and Vaillancourt 1996) and referred mainly to the principal Christian traditions or to the situation of native people (Tessier 1997).

6. According to Félix Guattari (1989: 22), for instance, social *ecosophy* aims at 'existential mutations concerning the essence of subjectivity'.

7. Cf. Antonioli 2015 for a discussion of the differences and similarities between the two authors.

freedom and social emancipation. Philosophical and militant traditions such as 'deep ecology' or 'anti-speciesism' were also opposed for being anti-humanistic.<sup>8</sup> Important public intellectuals, such as Ivan Illich, Jacques Ellul, Bernard Charbonneau, and Jean-Marie Pelt, explicitly proclaimed themselves as religiously and spiritually committed. Nevertheless, philosophers and environmental activists considered their work primarily as materialistic critiques of technology and capitalism. Within anthropology, the study of the link between 'spirituality' and 'nature' was more frequent, but occurred mostly when looking at distant societies (from a European point of view) marked by animistic or organicist worldviews (Descola 2005).

In recent years, however, a new generation of feminist and environmental philosophers have acknowledged the necessity of studying ecology in the West in relation to issues of spirituality. Authors such as Isabelle Stengers (2008), Vinciane Despret (2019), Emilie Hache (2016), Bruno Latour (2004, 2015), and Dominique Bourg (1996, 2003) currently contribute to ecological debates in both academic and public spheres, in part by referring to spirituality or other inner (in the sense of intimate, emotional) dimensions of ecology. Although they do not claim any personal religious affiliation, these authors present to a francophone audience new understandings of 'spirituality' or 'religion' as important components of ecological concerns.

### *The 'Spiritualization of Ecology' in Francophone Countries*

Attempts at bridging interdisciplinary boundaries to study the ecology/religion nexus in francophone countries only appeared at the beginning of the new millennium. Philosophers, theologians, and others organized numerous symposiums that interrogated the notion of 'spirituality' as a potential 'operative concept'<sup>9</sup> or as integrated within scientific insights into alternative agriculture.<sup>10</sup> This turning point also occurred within civil

8. For example, Jules Ferry's *Le Nouvel ordre écologique* (1992) even linked (deep) ecology to forms of totalitarianism. This book won the Medicis literary prize for essays in 1992.

9. In 2009, for instance, Dominique Bourg, Jacques Grinevald, and Pierre Gisel organized an international conference on 'Environment and Spirituality' at the University of Lausanne (Bourg and Papaux 2010). From 19–20 October 2017, another symposium entitled 'Le spirituel: Un concept opératoire en sciences humaines?' ('Spirituality: An Operational Concept in the Humanities?') took place at the University of Rennes 2.

10. 'Spiritualité et scientificité dans les agricultures alternatives' ('Spirituality and Scientificity in Alternative Farming'), 13–14 December 2017, University of Lausanne.

society: public demonstrations, media, and social movements all echoed these new understandings of 'spirituality' as tied to ecological concerns.

In this specific francophone context, our research team organized an international conference in April 2017. The intention was to gather scholars who observed an increasing tendency to affirm that 'more spirituality is needed' to face the ecological impasse. Following Hervieu-Léger's contribution to this topic, a new generation of French-speaking social scientists have begun to examine the ecology/religion nexus critically and empirically.<sup>11</sup> We focused, for instance, on workshops that train participants to undergo an 'inner transition' and that promote ritual practices inspired by Joanna Macy's 'Work That Reconnects' (Macy and Brown 2014). We also reflected on social movements and cultural productions that emphasize individual change through alternative lifestyles and that make explicit reference to 'spirituality' (though not to 'religion'). Along with Hervieu-Léger, we observed two simultaneous processes: (1) a rejection of 'religions' in the name of ecological concerns; and (2) a 'spiritual' ecological protest against the modern secular world. We argue that, far from being marginal, this double process indicates a major cultural shift in contemporary Western societies.

This special issue includes a compilation of papers emanating from the conference in order to shed light on this major shift as part of a broader 'spiritualization of ecology'. Through this process, the secular realms of political ecology and environmental sciences are drawn nearer to the spiritual and religious realms. The notion of 'spirituality' hence emerges as a new way to frame ecological issues with the effect of 'blur[ring] and undermin[ing] the modernist distinction between the religious and the secular' (Huss 2014: 51). Such changes are especially evident in the life courses of ecologists who gradually adopt spiritual references. They can also be seen in the rhetoric and actions of 'brokers' who popularize (Knoblauch 2008) Bron Taylor's concept of *dark green religion* (Taylor 2010). These brokers combine scientific knowledge-building and politically orientated environmental militancy seamlessly with spiritual claims. In this regard, the way social actors frame 'spirituality' is a critical aspect of the 'spiritualization of ecology'. Indeed, diverse actors contest the meaning of spirituality within a global public sphere that is rife with hybrid social practices and transgressions of many established institutional categories. The 'spiritualization' of ecology is thus revealing of novel cultural dynamics that extend to other social realms.

11. See the work of Ludovic Bertina and Mathieu Gervais in Bertina et al. (2013), Lionel Obadia (2019), and Jean Chamel's PhD thesis (2018).

*Four Empirical Studies of the Nexus between  
Spiritual Ecologies and Secularity*

The contributions presented in this special issue focus on new types of ecological engagement and their connection to novel forms of religious or spiritual *ethos*. They dedicate particular attention to contextual and situational dynamics contributing to associations between 'spirituality' and secular ecological discourses, modes of actions, and organizations. Mathieu Gervais's contribution delves into the complex literature on the intersection between political philosophy and sociology in order to question the potential politicization or de-politicization entailed by contemporary ecospiritual modes of engagement. Through fieldwork conducted among French peasants of diverging generational and religious composition engaged in ecospiritual movements, Gervais provides micro-sociological theoretical insights into the question of (de)politicization. He also provides a welcome empirical perspective on the competing understandings of what comprises religion, spirituality, and politics in the minds of his informants. Gervais highlights the contextual importance of the French model of secularism, called *laïcité*, and its mistrust of religion and its presence in the public domain. He also draws attention to an additional aspect of French history that has received less consideration by religious scholars, namely the transformation and decline of Catholic involvement among French peasantry. Gervais hence invites the reader to consider the continuities and discontinuities between new forms of contemporary agrarian ecological and spiritual engagements. Along the lines of this special issue, his contribution combines theoretical, historical, and empirical insights to better understand the national and rural dynamics at play in the 'spiritualization' of ecology.

Becci, Monnot, and Wernli's contribution centers on how, in the Swiss context, a new category of 'spiritually oriented' ecological and politically leftist activists is emerging. Summarizing the international literature on empirical studies of the link between religion and environmentalism, they note that religion is often equated with religious affiliation. Analyzing the Swiss case, they propose introducing the variable of spirituality into quantitative studies in order to reconcile seemingly contradictory results from case studies indicating a potential positive influence of religion on ecology, on the one hand, and from representative studies that tend to demonstrate the opposite, on the other. Those who are part of the new spiritually oriented ecological milieu emerging in Switzerland do not self-identify as religious, though many participate in spiritual practices like meditation, and experience holistic feelings. The authors connect this observation to Taylor's concept of *dark green religion* (2010)

and argue that contemporary forms of practiced spirituality among ecologists are rather ‘subtle’ in the sense of being adaptable, operating in the background, and supporting sustainability in a variety of domains such as health, gender equality, and scientific research. This contribution provides an overview of what may be considered a ‘spiritualization of ecology’ and shows how these processes may be detected using quantitative methods.

Alexandre Grandjean’s contribution addresses another aspect of the ‘spiritualization’ of ecology taking place in Switzerland. His ethnographic study details and analyzes how Swiss wine-crafting professionals, or vigneronns, adapt and translate Rudolf Steiner’s esoteric cosmology and the guidelines he provided for a holistic farming method known as ‘biodynamics’. Grandjean analyzes how the concept of *dark green religion* applies to Western agrarian and rural secularized settings. Using a theoretically grounded and reflexive ethnographical approach, he demonstrates that the on-going application of biodynamic guidelines by vigneronns entails two different yet historically intertwined processes: *secularization* and *spiritualization*. His analysis integrates the current literature on the ecology/religion nexus with ‘lived religion’ perspectives, thus responding to recent calls for more ethnographic studies of ‘contemporary spirituality’ and ‘esoteric’ practices and movements (Fedele and Knibbe 2020; Crockford and Aspren 2018).

Frédérique Louveau’s contribution offers a further illustration of the ‘spiritualization of ecology’. In Senegal, an Asian-inspired spirituality movement, Sukyo Mahikari, has obtained visibility and official recognition in the public domain and in TV broadcasts, especially through the ecological engagements of its followers in the Pan-African reforestation of the ‘Great Green Wall’. Using an anthropological and ethnographic lens, Louveau describes how Mahikari practitioners learn to ‘spiritualize’ their relation towards nature in light of Mahikari’s ‘silent green theology’, as well as broader local and ethical insights related to animism. Her fieldwork is grounded in the context of West Africa, where French colonialism still has an important influence on the state’s organization and adapted model of *laïcité*. Louveau highlights how relations between secular actors such as government agents and NGOs, on the one hand, and Mahikaris, on the other, entail a ‘working misunderstanding’, insofar as they each employ distinct interpretative and communicative frameworks but nonetheless arrive at pragmatic agreements regarding how to operate in tandem. Overall, she contributes to improving our understanding of the transnational mobility of specific Orientalized New Age and ecospiritual forms broadly encompassed by the label ‘dark green



religion'. More precisely, she specifies the regional adaptations of Sukyo Mahikari in the secular context of Senegal, where Islam and Sufi brotherhoods are still important vectors of social norms and framings that bear upon what counts as 'spirituality', as well as the interface between nature and culture.

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