

INTRODUCTION

Religion and Ecological Crisis: Responses from Asia

Mette Halskov Hansen and Kenneth Bo Nielsen

Abstract

In this introductory chapter, we situate the book and its case studies from Taiwan, China, India, and Vietnam in the wider literature on spiritual ecology, global sustainability, transcendence, and grassroots environmental movements in the Asian context. We identify conjuncture, future-orientation, and dynamics between self and collective as three specific interlocking dimensions in the spiritually and religiously inspired movements and initiatives that the book is concerned with. A focus on these dimensions, we argue, can reveal specificities, commonalities, and variations within a highly diverse field of spiritually and religiously inspired movements and initiatives that operate in very different cultural and political contexts.

Keywords: Environmentalism; spiritual ecology; environmental movements; transcendence; sustainability

A decade ago, the historian Prasenjit Duara wrote:

[T]he greatest obstacles facing the elevation of sustainability to a transcendent level are the untrammelled power of capitalist consumption and the imperative felt by national populaces and their leaders to avoid sacrificing national interests at all—or perhaps, almost all, costs. (Duara 2014, 28)

To Duara, any substantial move towards planetary sustainability would require “grass-roots activists and leaders who comprehend the necessity of transcending the limits of interests and place while pursuing ways to respond to local problems” (2014, 50).

The research leading to the nine chapters in this book has emerged in response to such calls for greater attention to the potentially powerful interconnections between global sustainability, transcendence, and grassroots activists and movements. At the heart of the book is the question of how practices of religion and spirituality motivate and engage individuals, groups, and organizations in environmental activities and transformations in ways that science and conventional

politics do not; for instance, by adopting and experimenting with more sustainable ways of living, by practicing locally attuned ecoagriculture, or by actively promoting waste-recycling, thereby cultivating environmental values and awareness through practical engagement. The book is the collective result of several years of collaboration in a research project that has explored practices and impacts of religious and spiritually inspired environmental forms of agency in China, Taiwan, India, and Vietnam. We are interested in the complexities, potentials, and pitfalls of environmental grassroots activities in a part of the world where many people are hard hit by the effects of climate change and long-term pollution, and where local temples or other forms of spiritual communities form an integrated part of everyday life. All our case studies concern people, communities, or organizations who respond to local manifestations of ecological crises by engaging non-worldly powers transcending the limits of sectional interests and the particularities of place.

In the following, we start out by situating our research in the context of a wider literature on the connections between transcendence and the ecological crisis. We then briefly describe our main methodological approaches, including a short discussion of how we critically engage with the notion of “spiritual ecology” as a framework for our case studies. Finally, we identify and analyze what we see as three interlocking dimensions that are particularly relevant for understanding similarities, differences, and variations between our studied cases of spiritual ecology, namely “conjuncture,” “future-orientation,” and “dynamics between self and collective.”

Religion, Transcendence, and the Global Ecological Crisis

In *The Crisis of Global Modernity*, Duara (2014) argues that the world has failed to effectively adopt a shared response to climate change and environmental degradation because humanity has become increasingly alienated from transcendent ideas and universal principles found in religions, philosophies, and political ideologies. This alienation, Duara asserts, has in effect eroded the foundations for arriving at more widely shared and effective ways of dealing with an accelerating crisis that is truly global in scope, and which confronts humanity as a whole, though in different ways. As the effects of environmental destruction, an irretrievable loss of biodiversity, and the ravages caused by climate change are increasingly felt everywhere, the very physical salvation of the planet both should and could become *the* shared transcendent goal of our times, he argues.

Duara’s emphasis on the transcendent, and on transcendental ideas and values, as a possible global environmental resource is significant. He refers to a way of human knowing that draws on non-worldly moral authority to challenge

existing conditions. It involves rational, mystical, and practical knowledge and behavior, designed and aimed “to affect and often change the self and the world”; but, crucially, to qualify as transcendent, it must rise above national sovereignty and sectional interests. In other words, non-worldly moral authority ceases to be truly transcendent when it is appropriated by existing worldly powers and used to exclude others (Duara 2014, 5).

Defying the all too obvious risk of essentializing and orientaling Asia and mythologizing premodern philosophies, Duara insists that it should be of particular importance for scholars and activists engaged in environmental questions to look to Asia for evidence of (and inspiration from) spiritual and religious environmental initiatives rooted in transcendental ideas and values that may be able to support and accelerate global efforts towards sustainability. On the one hand, this is a counter-intuitive proposition insofar as Asia is not only possibly the world’s most heavily polluted continent, but also home to some of the fastest growing economies that are powered by “the untrammelled power of capitalist consumption,” to use Duara’s own phrase (Duara 2014, 28). On the other hand, Duara identifies philosophical traditions and religions that have developed in Asia as examples and repositories of non-exclusive dialogical forms of transcendence that may have global relevance. Anyone who visits temples in China, Taiwan, or Vietnam, for example, will notice how deities, spiritual beings, and deified humans associated with Buddhism, Daoism, and local folk religions may be hosted side by side. Each of them constitutes a form of non-worldly transcendent moral authority in their own right, but all are part of a cosmology that conveniently allows for a dialogical relationship between them, and therefore also for worshippers to access and communicate with any of them at any time. Such qualities will also be familiar to visitors to Hindu temples in South Asia and beyond.

In making these arguments about the potential of shared and dialogical transcendent values, Duara is of course not alone. Other scholars, most notably Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, have also for some time argued that religious-philosophical traditions—not only in Asia but also elsewhere—contain an untapped global potential for motivating people to explore new and more sustainable ways of living. Their edited ten-volume book series titled *Religions of the World and Ecology* on the ecological implications of the doctrines and rituals of, among others, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism analyzes at length what these beliefs, philosophies, and religions might be able to offer a world marred by ecological crisis and environmental destruction. Tucker and Grim’s starting point is that “while in the past none of the religions of the world have had to face an environmental crisis such as we are now confronting, they remain key instruments in shaping attitudes towards nature” (Tucker and Grim 1998, xvii). They argue that there are many commonalities between the perspectives of different religions on

ecology, for instance that the natural world has intrinsic value, and that greed and destructive behavior should be morally condemned (Tucker and Grim 2014, 12).

Like Duara, Tucker and Grim take an explicitly normative approach when they argue for the universal need to promote shared values and ethics of nature and planetary health, and for the positive role that religions can—but not necessarily do—play in terms of rethinking theologies and reorienting practices in more environmentally attuned ways. Their introductions to each of the ten volumes on religions and ecology explicitly caution against “unqualified optimism” when it comes to assessing the potential of religions to be drivers of broad-based progressive environmental and ecological transformations. They point to the familiar and inevitable gaps, discrepancies, and contradictions that always arise between religious doctrines and teachings, and actual practices (Tucker and Grim 1998, xx; see also e.g., Grim and Tucker 2014; Gottlieb 2006; Miller 2017).

Buddhism is an illustrative case in point. In popular discourse and imagination, Buddhism has often been presented and interpreted as an inherently “eco-friendly” religion that stresses interconnectedness, moderation, and respect for the cycles and balance of nature. Buddhism and Buddhist institutions, however, have been very active drivers of agricultural expansion and the introduction of commercial crops and commodities, effecting massive changes to landscapes and environments throughout Asian history (Elverskog 2020). There may thus be nothing intrinsically “ecological” about Buddhism *per se*. Nonetheless, in the course of the last one hundred years or so, many Buddhist leaders and practitioners have radically changed their approach to and way of thinking about environmental and ecological questions, eventually producing a new architecture of Buddhism—one that is, in fact, deeply concerned with the environment (Elverskog 2020, 119). This transformation has been important for raising environmental awareness and motivating people into action, something which several contemporary studies of Buddhist ecological practices confirm (for example, Darlington 2012, 2019; Lee and Han 2015; and in this volume: Lu Rots; Chen and Li; and Wellens and Hansen).

Modern environmentalist articulations of Hinduism provide another illustrative case of the complexities and possible contradictions inherent in the relationship between religion, spirituality, and ecology. As Haberman (2006) shows in his work on India’s heavily polluted Yamuna River that is worshipped by Hindus as a goddess, Hindu theology may, on the one hand, function to inhibit or even resist environmental concerns and restorative action. Within one line of theological reasoning, the river Yamuna is viewed in a highly transcendent fashion as a river goddess so powerful and inherently pure that neither she, nor any living being that depends on her, can in fact ever be polluted. On the other hand, other theological interpretations can, in contrast, pave the way for more proactive environmentalist engagements: some worshippers maintain that heavy pollution does not affect the

river goddess herself who remains pure and unpolluted, but they will also acknowledge that the polluted water does indeed harm living beings and that action, or at the very least carefulness, is needed. Others yet may recognize that pollution can have harmful effects *both* on the beings who come in contact with the water, *and* on the river goddess herself. To them, the Yamuna River remains a “divine mother” but is recast as a vulnerable and ailing being increasingly in need of human care and protection. As such, Hindu theology, like many other theologies, can work in multiple ways, prompting a range of possible responses to local environmental pollution, from passivity and inaction to proactive environmentalism (see also Drew 2017).

Other studies from the Indian context serve to highlight the crucial role of the wider social and political context in shaping current articulations of religion and environmentalism. As several scholars have demonstrated, discourses and understandings of nature as divine and sacred rooted in Hindu theology may be effective in mobilizing broader constituencies behind environmental engagement and care; but, by advancing a form of “Hindu” religious environmentalism, such movements always risk playing into the hands of India’s xenophobic and chauvinist Hindu right that seeks to transform (oftentimes violently) India into an exclusively Hindu nation in which non-Hindu minorities have no place (Mawdsley 2002, 2006; Sharma 2014; Tomalin 2016)—a decidedly un-transcendental orientation, in Duara’s terms.

The actual capacity for religions to play an effective role in environmental and ecological transformation—whether locally or at higher levels of scale—thus cannot be deduced in any straightforward way from religious doctrine or ritual. It inheres in the practitioners’ interpretations of doctrines, and in people’s reflections and choices regarding how to put them into practice, individually or with others. And, as several of the chapters in this volume also demonstrate, it is conditioned by the wider social and political context and depends particularly on the political space available to religious groups who engage in environmental action locally. This, as we return to below, underscores the need for moving the study of religion, transcendence, and environmentalism beyond the confines of textual and doctrinal analysis, and into the domain of social practice and political context—an approach that the contributions to this volume adhere to.

Tucker and Grim clearly do not conceive of religion as a singular or even straightforward answer to the current environmental and ecological crisis. But they do suggest that since both ecological scientists and many religious practitioners today share a deep and genuine concern for our planetary future and recognize the urgent need for societies to change and act accordingly, they might be able to supplement each other in powerful ways. This insistence on a productive and strengthened convergence between the “ways of knowing” of the environmental and ecological sciences on the one hand, and religious institutions and practitioners on the other, is strikingly evident in many of the cases from Asia that we present in

the chapters of this book. Most of the religious or spiritual groups we have studied find inspiration in, or base their own arguments on, scientific knowledge about the environmental destruction of the planet. They recognize the necessity and capacity of science for supporting and driving the development towards more sustainable practices. “Science” matters in an affirmative and often productive way to many of the spiritually and religiously inspired environmental initiatives and movements that this book is concerned with. It constitutes an authority of a different kind than the non-worldly authority that inspires such groups’ own environmental and ecological forms of action. The relationship between science and religion, then, is rarely understood as a zero-sum “authority game.”

Interestingly, where the ecological anthropologist Leslie E. Sponsel (2020, 1) in his introduction to a special issue on religious environmental activism in Asia criticizes “most secular approaches” for only treating “specific superficial symptoms” of the current environmental and ecological crisis, the spiritual and religious activists that appear in the case studies in this book are rarely as dismissive of science. Indeed, such a dualistic understanding that reduces science (alongside other “secular approaches”) to a sphere that deals only with surface symptoms and contrasts it with an equally reductionist sphere of spirituality that more substantially engages with the deeper and more transcendent spiritual and moral roots of our current crisis, is much less pronounced among the leaders and grassroots activists in our case studies than what Sponsel’s argument would lead us to expect. Most of our protagonists would agree with Sponsel that the current planetary crisis cannot be solved through technical fixes or science alone, and they call instead for radical changes to worldviews, values, and behaviors. However, it is the holistic orientation of their approach—and not the dualistic separation of the secular and the spiritual, or the scientific and the transcendental-ethical—that stands out as foundational to their work and efforts.

Methodology, Approach, and Conceptualization

The research presented in this book mainly investigates practices, forms of activism, and ways of organizing from an emic perspective, that is, by starting from people’s own ways of interpreting spiritual traditions, or working with religious doctrines, teachings, or texts. In other words, we do not engage in any substantial analysis of the doctrines or classics of the traditions that appear in the chapters in this book, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Daoism, and Sikhism, relying instead on the work of other scholars in the field. Many studies on “religion and ecology” in Asia, including those in the series edited by Tucker and Grim mentioned above, are first and foremost based on the analysis and interpretations of texts and doctrines.

They provide invaluable insights into the ways in which different religions and philosophies perceive of the relations between humans, other living beings, the planet, and the wider world beyond. However, the concerns that lie at the heart of this book are how religion, spirituality and transcendent ideas and values infuse daily environmental practices, and to what extent they motivate people to environmental action.

The nine chapters cover both larger established religious institutions and local spiritually inspired collectives and initiatives. We follow Roger S. Gottlieb's (2006, viii) conceptualization of religion as a system of belief, ritual, and institutional life; and spirituality as constituting a certain way of being religious. Spirituality is a kind of religiosity that accentuates moral values, self-cultivation, and personal experience, and is characterized by theological tolerance rather than attachment to one established religious normality or institution (2006, ix). We intentionally adhere to such an open conceptualization of spirituality, agreeing with Peter van der Veer (2009, 5) that it is this very vagueness that makes the concept of spirituality so productive—standing out as something opposed to materiality, distinctive from the body, and distinctive from, but not necessarily opposed to, organized and institutionalized religions.

Most of our fieldwork and other forms of data production were carried out in India, China, Taiwan, and Vietnam in the period from early 2021 to late 2024, allowing us to juxtapose and situate our diverse cases within the same global context characterized by circulating discourses on sustainable development goals, robust yet politically disputed scientific knowledge about the effects of climate change and environmental destruction, and highly contentious political and popular debates about possible solutions and ways forward. However, each of our cases also accentuates how local, regional, and national political, social, and cultural contexts impact, and sometimes define, how spiritually inspired environmental activities and movements are designed, organized, and put into practice. For example, some groups and movements are driven by the need to confront aggressive capital interests that encroach on and appropriate local natural resources, thereby threatening local livelihoods or destroying landscapes that may hold profound cultural or spiritual value. Others, in contrast, may need to carefully balance the invocation of religious beliefs in their environmental activities in order not to provoke a coercive response from an authoritarian state apparatus, which may jeopardize their very organizational existence and cause harm to local populations.

Despite significant differences between the cultural and political contexts in which the environmental and ecological activities analyzed in the book are embedded, the religious-spiritual collectivities and institutions that are the focal points of the individual chapters share several key characteristics across contexts. They contain elements of ritual, ideas of awakening, a sense of a transcendent and

larger purpose, a moral code. Sometimes, they have a charismatic leader who helps to attract new followers or supporters. Equally important, they all exemplify how religious and spiritual institutions and movements may become repositories and resources of ways of knowing and acting on the world that supplement—and in some instances also offer alternatives to—scientific and secular forms of reasoning. This happens in fields as diverse as health, agriculture, food, consumption, and waste recycling. Not least, many of our cases illustrate a “non-materialist” worldview in the sense that they (more or less consciously) challenge—and sometimes reject outright—values and practices of growth, extraction, consumption and competition. In contrast, they argue for shared and transcending values of nature and the natural environment, based on which an individual may cultivate alternatives that can transform ways of being in the world and build individual and collective environmental awareness. The prevalent orientation that emerges from the case studies is one of seeking out new and creative fusions between different ways of knowing and acting on the world, working towards the shared goal of creating more sustainable futures through action in the present.

Spiritual Ecology

The cases we present in these chapters may be considered forms of “spiritual ecology.” Sponsel (2020,¹) deploys this term to denote a “vast, complex, diverse, and dynamic arena of intellectual and practical activities at the interfaces of religions and spiritualities with nature, ecologies, environments, and environmentalisms.” Echoing earlier scholarship on social interfaces as particularly significant sites of contested knowledge production and social action involving differentially positioned actors (e.g., Arce and Long 2000; Long 2000), Sponsel’s formulation is suggestive insofar as it stresses how spiritually, religiously, or transcendentally anchored ecological movements and initiatives do not emerge from some pure, pristine spiritual space uncontaminated by wider historical, social, and political dynamics. Rather, such movements and initiatives are always dynamically shaped by the multiple forces—historical, social, and political—that constitute the contexts from within which they emerge.

Sponsel’s notion of spiritual ecology is imbued with a great deal of flexibility that productively allows it to be deployed analytically in a wide array of contexts. However, due to its generic nature it also underspecifies how “the arena” of spiritual ecology is constituted, and it remains relatively silent on the question of how “the intellectual and practical activities” that unfold on this arena may be conditioned by the specific context in which they emerge. Based on the case studies in this book, and drawing theoretical inspiration from recent advances in

the study of “aspirations” in agrarian transformation, in particular by Bennike et al. (2020), we identify three specific interlocking dimensions of spiritual ecology and spiritually and religiously inspired movements and initiatives in the Asian context: *conjuncture, future-orientation, and dynamics between self and collective*.

First, we argue that activities in the arena of spiritual ecology are crucially shaped by the specific conjuncture at which they emerge, that is, by historically produced conditions of possibility. Spiritually and religiously inspired movements and initiatives are inherently part of wider ethical and normative worlds with strong transcendental contents, but they are also always circumscribed by the material conditions in which people live, and by wider political opportunity structures. Secondly, as initiatives that variously work to change the way we live, eat, produce, think, imagine, and act on our shared planet, they invoke an “ethics of possibility” (Appadurai 2013; Copeland 2023), an active orientation towards the future in ways that oscillate between anticipatory and transformative engagements. Lastly, as individual and collective efforts “to affect and often change the self and the world” (Duara 2014, 5), they involve “active negotiations and reconfigurations of the relationship between subject and collective” (Bennike et al. 2020, 7). When examined together, conjuncture, future-orientation, and the dynamics between self and collective reveal “the spatio-temporal specificity” (Bennike et al. 2020, 7) and variation of the spiritually and religiously inspired movements and initiatives covered in this book.

Conjuncture

Structural constraints shape not only what spiritually and religiously inspired movements and initiatives can do and achieve, but also their imaginaries. They are informed by specific historical processes and by wider ethical and normative horizons, as well as shaped by political and economic processes that make up the conditions of possibility under which spiritually and religiously inspired initiatives can materialize into social action for ecological change. While conjunctural specificities are unpacked in each of the chapters, we find two broader, global processes that register more or less forcefully across conjunctures, namely (1) the strong endorsement of environmental agendas by all the major and very many minor religious traditions; and (2) the growing political legitimacy of environmental discourse (if not always practice) across regime types. The former—often referred to as “the greening of religion”—has created new spaces within religious institutions and communities for articulating and acting on environmental and ecological issues “in the name of religion.” The latter—visible, for example, in the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in 2015 by all UN member states—creates new legitimate political spaces for raising environmental problems in the public

sphere, albeit to very varying degrees. Indeed, across the countries covered by the nine articles in this book, we find that variations in historically produced political contexts matter significantly in shaping the conditions of possibility for spiritual or religiously inspired ecological initiatives.

At one end of the spectrum, we encounter one of Asia's best functioning democracies with a vibrant civil society, Taiwan, which provides a rare space where religious and spiritual environmental initiatives can unfold relatively unpoliced by the state, as shown in Wellens and Hansen's study of the locally embedded environmentalism centered on local temples dedicated to Shennong, the Divine Farmer. At the other end, we find the despondent situation among the Blang village communities in southwestern China, as analyzed by Bäckström. Not only has the incursion and consolidation of the Chinese state over many decades caused unprecedented ecological and agricultural destruction, but its strong modernizing and centralizing thrust has also deprived the Blang of many of the ethical and spiritual resources that used to regulate their relationships with their environment. This has left them in a situation where they struggle to define and navigate a looming crisis in meaningful ways.

In other settings, however, we find that the political context can matter for spiritual or religiously inspired movements and initiatives in more contradictory and less clear-cut ways. In India, the consolidation of an authoritarian-populist form of Hindu nationalism that sees India as first and foremost a Hindu nation is, for example, highly conducive to certain forms of ecological and environmental mobilization, such as the guru-led campaigns for agricultural environmentalism and alternative forms of agroecology that draw on a longer South Asian tradition of guru-based spirituality and leadership, as analyzed by Münster (see also Ranjan 2024). This ascendant Hindu nationalism that now increasingly informs popular common sense in much of India is similarly a crucial enabler of a more dispersed movement of Indian middle-class and elite consumer preferences towards the ostensibly healthier and more nutritious milk produced by India's iconic "holy cows." This is a niche product that, as Baviskar shows, would scarcely have become so popular had it not been for the working of a distinctly Hindu nationalist cultural politics over a longer time span. In contrast, the anti-minority discourse and politics of Hindu nationalism means that "non-Hindu" forms of religious or spiritual environmentalism must work in an increasingly shrinking space where they need to tread very carefully, as Nielsen and Gokhale's analysis of the environmental engagements of the Catholic Church in Goa shows. For the ecologically minded Sikhs in north India, studied by Kvanneid, the political context works in openly contradictory ways. While the organization EcoSikh can claim legitimacy by working with, and within, a religious tradition with "Indian roots and origins," their espousal of Sikhi ideas and values—however eclectic and subdued—also works to

establish them as a group with a distinct religious profile that sets them apart from mainstream Hinduism.

In the ostensibly secular People's Republic of China (PRC), the Sunshine Ecovillage that draws on interpretations of Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist traditions, has, as Qian, Liu, and Svarverud show, largely sought to interpret religious and spiritual texts and messages in a secular language to avoid conflicts with the state and state ideology. In line with Communist Party discourse, they interpret philosophical texts and religious doctrines as cultural reflections of a Chinese glorious past, and they often connect them directly to current national ideology and policy. The Taiwanese Tzu Chi Buddhist environmental organization, studied by Chen and Li, deploys strikingly similar strategies when operating in the PRC, navigating a monitored space by downplaying the religious elements of their environmentalism, instead actively aligning their activities with state programs, and highlighting the positive impact on local communities (see also Lee and Ling 2015; Weller et al. 2017). A similar dynamic is evident in Vietnam, where the Hòa Hảo Buddhist religious movement has experienced a significant revival after having been organizationally abolished by the Communist regime for decades. Vietnam's many new environmental laws and policies, Lu Rots shows, have created new opportunities for Hòa Hảo organizations and followers to actively engage with state-led environmental programs, enabling them to considerably expand their footprint, build up the organization's social presence, and gain greater legitimacy in the eyes of the state.

The Future(s)

While all our cases of spiritually and religiously inspired movements and initiatives work in a historically and politically conditioned *present*, they also have a strong orientation towards the *future*. Although the future is uncertain and managing uncertainty is one major *raison d'être* for religions and spirituality, people and institutions relate to and engage with that future in very varied ways, depending on how they interpret it and what they expect from it. To some, the future may appear as relatively inevitable and a given, leading to ecological practices of a more anticipatory nature. To others, the future may appear malleable and subject to the influence of human and divine agency, including the agency located in ecological movements and initiatives, opening a space in the present for action of a more transformational kind.

As would be expected, most of the protagonists in our studies envision a future where they themselves play an active part in formulating or enacting alternative ways of thinking or living as compared to the present. Imaginings of a better and more sustainable future are created and pursued through the activities of

individuals and organizations that aim to address problems experienced in the present. Many are especially concerned with the risks associated with the production and consumption of food, seeking a break with industrialized food production, and promoting initiatives that they believe will improve bodily and ecological health. For instance, the Catholic priests and the local village-level farmers' club in Goa (Nielsen and Gokhale), seek to reinvent older forms of community agriculture as a means of charting a greener, more sustainable future for a state reeling under the ecologically destructive pressures of mass tourism, real estate development, and extractivism. The Zero Budget Spiritual Farming techniques promoted in India by Subhash Palekar (Münster) aim for a mode of agricultural production that is fully decoupled from chemicalization and the use of pesticides, insisting that only Indian philosophy can provide the perfect blend of science and spirituality required to bring about this future transformation. Although operating on a much smaller scale, the activists in the Sunshine Ecovillage in the mountains of Eastern China also try to reinvent past forms of agriculture without the use of pesticides. Drawing on Daoist classics, they integrate their own interpretation of the "natural" with sciences of regenerative agriculture, thus outlining a future path towards safe food production and holistic self-cultivation (Qian, Liu and Svarverud). Similarly, the activities of EcoSikh (Kvanneid) promote organic and natively grown food and awareness-raising, coupled with small-scale reforestation projects to create a future green and healthy Punjab, offering a possible way forward for a state that is currently living through the worst effects on ecologies and bodies of decades of intensively chemicalized agricultural development. The vegetarian turn among Tzu Chi volunteers (Chen and Li) stems from a comparable vision of simultaneously producing healthier bodies and a future healthy planet: "Protecting life and the environment starts at the dining temple," as one of the international Tzu Chi branches proclaims (Tzu Chi Canada n.d.). Health-conscious elite Indian consumers can also be seen to start at the dining table, opting for particular brands of milk. Their motivation largely springs from concerns about individual and bodily health—prevalent among many members of the middle classes especially (e.g., Agrawal and Gupta 2018; Kennedy et al. 2019)—and their changing patterns of milk consumption have little positive impact on ecological relations more widely (Baviskar). But they do at least implicitly raise larger issues about the future of human, animal and planetary health rooted in latent concerns about industrialized food production and animal welfare.

The environmentally oriented activities in the Shennong temples in Taiwan (Wellens and Hansen) are also strongly centered on questions of personal and bodily health, invoking and adapting the historical legacy of the Divine Farmer to safeguard the lives, health, and livelihoods of both present and future generations. Threats to the natural environment are perceived not only as being directly

harmful for those living in the present, but also, due to the moral duties associated with filial piety, as a potential threat to future generations and the very continuation of people's lineage. This gives the temples' ecological action in the present, however limited, a clear future-orientation that may lead to wider environmental awakening among the people who seek help from the Divine Farmer. Similarly, for followers of Hòa Hảo Buddhism in Vietnam (Lu Rots), the cultivation of individual sustainable practices in the present is also firmly fixed on the future. It is not just a means for creating a more collective sustainable future society, but first of all a way of achieving a future rebirth in the Pure Land for the individual, in line with Hòa Hảo philosophy and beliefs.

In this larger picture, Bäckström's study among the Blang in southwestern China constitutes an outlier. The Blang recognize that their land and the soil is "ill" because of the exaggerated use of fertilizers and agrochemicals, and they are greatly concerned about declining health due to food additives. They also envision solutions that are grounded in past practices of swidden/shifting cultivation, but due to the Chinese state's firm prohibition of these practices they find themselves unable to recuperate collective spaces and symbolic resources for action and organization, complicating even an anticipatory engagement with the future. In all the other cases, however, the future appears as malleable and is engaged in transformative ways, even if the temporal and imaginative horizons of the engagements vary with context. All the initiatives and movements that are analyzed simultaneously mix considerations of what is desirable with considerations of what is viable. Indeed, none of the movements covered in this book are engaged in revolutionary initiatives that explicitly seek the overthrow of existing political-economic orders. They are rather, as Kvanneid (this volume) puts it, primarily characterized by an element of pragmatism, rooted in an unsentimental assessment of the conditions of possibility that prevail in the present.

Self and Collective

Projects and organizations imagining more sustainable ecological futures are necessarily implicated in negotiations over the meaning of self and collectivity. Although people may come together in smaller or larger spiritual or religious collectivities to pursue shared ecological or environmental projects, there is always a potential tension between individual and collective aspirations, desires, and hopes. Moreover, as several of our cases demonstrate, the pursuit of shared ecological or environmental projects may in itself alter the meaning and form of existing spiritual or religious collectivities, their institutional arrangements, and the position of individuals within them.

In several cases of institutionalized religions, we find that for most people, joining the organizations in the first place was largely unrelated to any specific desire to become an environmental activist. Tzu Chi is a long-established international Buddhist organization with an outward-looking philosophy of promoting a more just and sustainable world through volunteer contributions to charity and practices of material frugality (Chen and Li this volume; Weller et al. 2017; Huang 2009). But they also emphasize that the path to solving the ecological crises is through practices of loving oneself, others, and the environment. By contributing to collective activities that are expected to lead to a better future, each individual also gains merit, which is an important motivational factor. Merit is also at the heart of many of the activities undertaken by followers of the millennial Hòa Hảo organization in Vietnam. This pursuit of individual merit, however, is sometimes difficult to align with the organization's environmentalist ambitions. As Lu Rots shows, the organization's goal of reducing the use of single-use plastics and plastic waste in society is routinely undermined by other merit-generating organizational activities such as hosting large, generous celebrations in connection with temple activities—celebrations that invariably produce very large amounts of unrecycled plastic in the form of discarded single-use cups and containers. A related but more inward-looking approach to the transformation of the self as a means to generate larger changes is found in the Indian Zero Budget Natural Farming movement (Münster), whose guru-like leader Palekar argues that a simple and natural lifestyle must be achieved through yogic practices, producing an inner transformation of the self.

The fact that people are often drawn into the environmental activities of religious or spiritual groups for a multitude of different and sometimes self-interested reasons—and quite possibly with limited environmentalist content—does not necessarily render their environmental engagements any less significant. In the case of the Sunshine Ecovillage in China (Qian, Liu and Svarverud), for example, people seem to primarily come to escape intensely felt social pressures and expectations that they find it impossible to meet or adapt to. In the case of the Divine Farmer in Taiwan (Wellens and Hansen), many people who first and foremost adhere and pray to him for his medicinal powers, have eventually also come to appreciate the way that the Divine Farmer is now also enlisted to promote issues of soil health and sustainable food production. Several chapters emphasize that religious and spiritual institutions may see value in engaging in environmental activities partly because it helps them maintain or regain relevance and legitimacy in a local or national context (Lu Rots; Nielsen and Gokhale; Wellens and Hansen); but this should not be taken to mean that their efforts are less “authentic” or less important for local environments, individual participants, and communities, or for charting greener futures more generally.

We do, however, also find that some religious organizations make concerted efforts to include new groups and individuals within the ambit of their

environmental initiatives, thereby expanding the meaning of community beyond conventional religious boundaries. In Goa, the active repurposing of the Catholic Church in a greener environmentalist direction (Nielsen and Gokhale) has made it more directly relevant to a broader group of Goans from across communities who share a concern with acutely felt environmental problems. Similarly, the Eco-Sikh movement (Kvanneid) works to reinterpret Sikh teachings and philosophy and to create new practices in ways that appeal to people beyond the Sikh community who are equally concerned with the ecological crisis.

The chapters also offer illustrations of strongly felt individual environmental and health anxieties that struggle to articulate with established or emerging collectivities. The Blang (Bäckström) experience is that their long-established community, its spirits, gods, forests, and lands are severely challenged by ecological degradation; but the space for collective action to generate the profound changes they see as necessary is so limited by the policies of the Chinese state that they can only pragmatically seek to adapt rather than pursue collective action. In one of the cases from India (Baviskar), the shifting milk preferences of some elite Indian consumers can arguably be said to constitute a loose “movement” of sorts, but it remains closely tied to individual health concerns and individual choice, lacking the kind of collective organizational component that might have enabled it to mount, for example, a stronger critique of the violence and wider ecological consequences of industrial dairying.

Conclusion

There are considerable differences between the communities and institutions that we have studied and critically situated within the broadly defined “arena” of spiritual ecology. Some of them play an important role in generating awareness of the global climate and environmental crisis, or in experimenting with alternative and more sustainable forms of agriculture, food production, and consumption. Some actively or indirectly help people to deal with individual climate anxiety and fears about what the future may hold. Many create images of a possible future that entails a “good and meaningful life,” offering alternative ways of being in the world that challenge the drive towards limitless economic growth and increasing material consumption that often take center stage in political debates and policy making.

The cases we discuss in the book are examples of “spiritual ecology activities” that function and operate within the temporal and spatial specificities of conjuncture and context. The various actors and activists we present largely accept the existence of structural constraints, and do not challenge the basic political set-up of their societies. Indeed, there are no immediate ecological revolutions on the

horizon for any of the communities we have studied. However, some do already play an important role as agents of environmental transformations, whether on a limited local scale or as part of larger and more widespread communities of spiritual ecology. Based in locally grounded beliefs, and often actively seeking to expand existing communities, they are able to motivate people to turn their attention towards collective environmental engagement. Some of them manage to explore pathways towards a more ecologically and socially sustainable future that take the cosmologies, beliefs, values, and interests of local communities and people seriously, and in ways that international interventions or secular NGOs are not always able to. One of the conclusions that one may draw from the otherwise very diverse case studies is that spiritual ecology has an impact on individuals, communities, and sometimes on ecological practices, especially when it comes in the form of organized, locally grounded collective initiatives; and, not least, when it has visions that are recognizable and meaningful for people and serve both collective and individual purposes.

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