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Grounding Eco-Spiritualities: Insights Drawing on Research in Switzerland

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Abstract

The articulation of ecology and spirituality has long-time either be ignored or taken for granted. Rarely has it been approached by a constructivist or processual perspective. This text draws on research on public environmentalism in Switzerland since 2015 when an increasing number of appeals to consider ecological issues with spiritual references appeared. While this observation could not be explained simply by the hypothesis of "greening of religions", the research asked what the social profiles were of the carriers of this articulation? This text presents how the research has explored life courses of environmentalists to reconstruct the way they have articulated their spiritual or moral ideas with ecology or vice versa. It thereby identifies two main groups who have very different positions in the public realm. The aim of this text is to understand how the two fields of religion—in the broadest sense of the word—and ecology, which were previously quite distinct and relatively impervious to each other, have recently been reshaped in relation to each other, particularly around the notion of eco-spirituality. This text adopts a socio-anthropological perspective to describe eco-spirituality not only as an intellectual category invented in theological and philosophical spheres but as entailing a variety of practices, worldviews, and meaning-making processes interweaving ecology and spirituality.

1. Introduction

The multiple ways in which ecology and spirituality interlace have been researched by scholars from various disciplines. Focusing on the German context, and in particular on philosophy since Romanticism, some scholars, such as Aurélie Choné (2013; 2016) have specifically studied the development of eco-spirituality. Often this notion is considered as linking ideas that are inherently close. The scholar of religion Whitney Bauman (Bauman/Bohannon/O'Brien 2011) focuses on the genealogy of the word "ecology" as introduced by the German biologist Ernst Haeckel (1866). He argues that several Romantic and humanistic worldviews became linked to this moment in various parts of the world. For instance, Ellen Swallow Richards introduced the term "Oekology" in the USA, proposing a normative, action-oriented field (Walsh 2018: 133) focused on improving environmental quality and encompassing health and nutrition (Merchant 1980). From the beginning of ecological thinking, therefore, the moral question of how humans should conduct their lives as individuals and as a society has been connected with the study of biotopes and ecosystems.

Although a certain consensus seems to exist regarding an inherent connectedness between questions of ultimate meaning and ecology, the scientific and political institutionalization of ecology has rather widened the distance to religion. According to Lynn White Jr's famous thesis (1967), monotheistic and in particular Christian worldviews were suspected to be at the root of the environmental disaster of the modern age. Since the 1990s, large interdisciplinary academic

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programs have of course been dedicated to examining this thesis in a systematic way (Kanagy/Hart 1995; Shibley/Wiggins 1997). For example, largely on the instigation of Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (Grim/Tucker 2011), the Center for the Study of World Religions (CSWR) at Harvard Divinity School organized a series of lectures from 1996 to 1998. They shed light on how world religions are or can be considered "green".

Certain spheres within institutionalized religions have indeed been established or remodelled based on the encounter between ecology and spirituality. A commission within the World Council of Churches (WCC) discussed justice and sustainability issues and took important environmental positions in the 1960s and 1970s. Claiming a moral duty to preserve ecosystems and "Creation" or "sacred Nature", the Roman Catholic Pope Francis and the Christian Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew have extensively drawn on these insights and elaborated them. Parishes and mosques worldwide have been transmitting the importance of caring for the environment in daily life by contemplating and preserving nature around their buildings. Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* (2015) revealed a larger ongoing development in the field of religion, which scholars have labelled the "Greening of Religion Hypothesis" (Taylor 2016). Although a number of prominent theologians have been supportive of such developments (Monnot/Rognon 2020) they by no means account for the majority of church members. Only a few have engaged more extensively in the large-scale mobilization of religious environmentalism. On the contrary, scientific findings have confirmed Lynn White Jr's 1967 thesis, which states that the anthropocentric worldview favoured by Western Christianity was the main source of the ecological crisis (Koehrsen et al. 2019). Since the 1980s, studies have repeatedly shown that people affirming adherence to a religion, and particularly to Christianity and Judaism (Eckberg/Blocker 1989), were less in favour of pro-environmental actions than those with no religious affiliations (Guth et al. 1995: 377). More recently, Jens Koehrsen (2015) has also found that in the environmentally committed German town of Emden, people with no religious affiliation are the most active in environmentalism (Koehrsen 2018). Parallel to the studies on established religions, a number of scholars researched spirituality emerging out of encounters with nature outside a formal religious context. Across the Atlantic, for instance, Bron Taylor's observation of sports in which nature plays a major role, such as surfing, and his analysis of long conversations and interviews with surfers, led him to conceptualize the notion of *Dark Green Religion* (Taylor 2010).

In 2010, Mary Evelyn Tucker published a major overview (2010: 405) of the disciplines that have contributed to interrogating the conjunction between religion and ecology. While she names philosophy, anthropology, geography, history, theology, and ecofeminist criticism as having all been heavily involved in the conjunction of themes, she does not mention sociology. This absence could be revealing of a certain lack of studies considering the relationship between ecology and religion as socially constructed.

Unfortunately, few research projects studying the articulation of ecology and spirituality have so far taken a constructivist, processual, or contextualized approach. However, the questions they raise for the social scientific study of religion are intriguing. If, as Manuel Castells (1996) writes, environmental activists in Western European contexts started to articulate a moral and political appeal in the late 1960s, this morality has increasingly come to coincide with spirituality. In the early decades of the new millennium, a proliferation of demonstrations and climate strikes have led the environmental movement to grow rapidly in Western Europe. 2015 was a key year: COP21 was

held in Paris, Pope Francis published the encyclical Laudato Si' as a call to humanity to consider ecological issues, and several publications by eco-activists from both the Global North and the Global South enjoyed success worldwide. The popularity of spirituality (Knoblauch 2010) has grown here in this period, as have spiritual ways of thinking and practicing ecology. At the same time, as we have seen, there has been a slow process of greening of contemporary religions and spiritualities.

From a social-scientific perspective, it is interesting to ground these two processes by asking whether and how they intersect in the public sphere. Who are the social carriers of these two movements? When does morality coincide with spirituality, and which type of spirituality emerges and preponderates in this context? How do environmentalists articulate their spiritual or moral ideas with ecology in their life course? The aim of this text is not to investigate the connection between ecology and spirituality by looking at whether some religious groups have turned green or not. It is rather to understand how the two fields of religion—in the broadest sense of the word—and ecology, which were previously quite distinct and relatively impervious to each other, have recently been reshaped in relation to each other, particularly around the notion of eco-spirituality. This text adopts a socio-anthropological perspective and proposes a way to study the social "fabrication" (Quéré 2021) of eco-spiritualities. Besides being an intellectual category invented in theological and philosophical spheres, eco-spirituality entails a variety of practices, worldviews, and meaning-making processes that interweave ecology and spirituality. In the field, eco-spirituality is only sometimes an emic notion. It is crucial that scholars develop their own etic categories to analyse this situation. This text suggests looking at how the articulation has come along biographically and situationally.

After describing the research and methodology, this text concentrates on two types of life course that have emerged from the research results. The conclusion raises the insight gained through the analysis of the individual accounts that these collected testimonies reflect an understanding of ecology as primarily relational.

2. Research and methodology

From 2015 to 2021, I led a research team at the University of Lausanne,[1] Switzerland, comprising two student assistants, Salomé Okoekpen and Virgile Delmas; senior researcher Christophe Monnot; and doctoral student Alexandre Grandjean. During the first two years, we explored the situation at the local level to document the encounter between an ecologisation of the spiritual—or what has been termed the "greening of religion"—and the "spiritualization of ecology". We then enlarged the scope to the whole country and studied ecological discourses and environmentalist actors and events that encourage greater, often spiritual, sensitivity towards nature. A variety of practices, from eco-psychology to neo-animism and neo-paganisms, and from the enchantment of nature to radical environmentalism, were identified. In large parts of Switzerland, we observed a profusion of eco-spiritual practices, which rub shoulders within a network of environmental commitments. For instance, in 2016 the Swiss wood engineer and author, Ernst Zürcher, published a bestseller on the "sensitive communication" of trees, studying trees beyond what is immediately visible (Zürcher 2016). Intrigued by these occurrences, the research team sharpened the central

[1] The research project "Towards a 'spiritualization' of ecology? Sociological analysis of new mediations of ecological issues in Switzerland" directed by Irene Becci and financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation. At the time of submission of this article, the book presenting the final results is at press with Seismo (Becci 2023). The following website contains some podcasts drawing on the research: https://wp.unil.ch/arborescence (26.11.2022).

research question to focus on how environmental issues were mediated to the broader public, as an increasing tendency to use spiritual references to raise awareness was obvious.

We used a multi-site ethnographic approach, observing over 80 public ecological events, and identifying a large network where we collected interviews and documents. This network of actors proposing articulations of ecology and spirituality was transversal to a series of social spheres: Academia—including both natural and human scientists—art and culture; agriculture; established religious institutions and contemporary spirituality alternative to the former; and politics. Within this network, the team held longer interviews with 50 public actors who bring a spiritual dimension to ecological issues and whom we identified as key figures (Becci/Grandjean 2021). Some were what Max Weber (1988: 15) labelled "cultural carriers" ("Kulturträger"), i.e., figures who not only exert a normative influence on people's subjective views about ecology but who also have an impact on institutional discourses about it across time and in various social spheres. Others were "moral entrepreneurs" (Becker 1963), who draw on partially religious or spiritual language to bring about change in their audiences.

By means of a grounded-theory approach, we established that there is a multitude of ways of understanding and practicing the link between "spirituality" and "ecology". Indeed, these terms are used in very different fashions, and their differing usage reveals lines of tension and negotiation. In order to understand these differences from a social-constructivist perspective, it is necessary to look closer at the making of eco-spiritualities as traced through the narrative of a life course and to pay attention to their institutional anchorage that each life course possesses. We asked the interviewees to tell their life stories, paying attention to the various socialization instances (family, education, work, friends, etc.) that have forged their views on ecology and spirituality. We placed particular attention on understanding whether there were trigger events in an interviewee's life course that allowed them to change their outlook. It was indeed clear from the beginning that these key figures were not straightforwardly transmitting some teaching they had inherited from previous figures, but that their narrative was a pioneering one. In the following, I focus on a few biographical and structural factors, such as institutional legitimacy, religious socialization, and gender, which are crucial to the fabrication of eco-spirituality.

3. Contemporary spirituality in the context of environmental activism: some conceptual clarification

Before presenting the empirical data, we need to take a conceptual step back to clarify the central notion of "spirituality" in the milieu of environmental activism. Although contemporary spirituality comprises a wide range of practices, attitudes, views, and beliefs—from the New Age to neopaganism and beyond—a core set of values revolves around "authenticity and expressiveness", emotional and personal feelings, the centrality of the self, and its healing potentiality (Sointu/Woodhead 2008: 267). This set of spiritual values is mostly mobilized to highlight a distinction from established religions, which are considered hierarchical and authoritarian. Nowadays, the term is no longer necessarily subject to an esoteric, mystical, or exotic connotation.[2] It is rather used in a subtle way[3] for different purposes that cannot be seen as confined to the realm of individual or consumerist-narcissistic well-being. As Ellie Hedges and James A. Beckford (2000) pointed out

[2] In the sense used by Altglas 2014.
[3] For our understanding of the notion of spirituality as subtle, see Becci/Monnot/Wernli 2021.

years ago, when contemporary spirituality is practiced in the realm of nature and ecological commitment, it is not necessarily self-centred but includes a strong emphasis on community. Indeed, a certain official ecological discourse has long referred to spirituality when pointing to values encountered in distant, non-western, indigenous, or native people, e.g., societies that attribute a spiritual value to all species in nature.[4]

Our analysis of the discourses of the ecologists that we interviewed shows that, since the turn of the millennium, a broad cultural shift is occurring regarding the referent of the term "spirituality". To some extent, this research confirms Véronique Altglas's findings (2005) about orientalist currents in some forms of spirituality. For instance, one author, who also acts as a guide on "spiritual walks" in Swiss parks, which look for "nature spirits", explains that practicing Yoga led him to develop an interest in India. Disappointed by what he learned studying philosophy at university, he often went to India, as he says: "Precisely to develop spirituality […] my aim was to really gain wisdom, to understand […] India, I was attracted to this country." He travelled to India several times after his first stay in 1999. Finally, he met a person there who was a major influence on him: "A blind Indian spiritual teacher" who taught him the importance of the senses "beyond the visible world." He then used this acquired capacity to sense "energies" in nature during his guided tours in Switzerland. As Altglas writes, in this form of spirituality the East, India, is associated with a certain mystical image, and opposed to the West (see also Hann/Goltz 2010 on the constructed character of the oppositions between East and West) as spiritual practices are not considered Western per se (see in this regard Promey 2014: 11). Another interviewee has a particular link to Indonesia, where she supports major projects in the area of sustainability. "The East" is a common reference point for various interviewees as an indication of spirituality, and Western secularity is criticized, mainly from a cultural and scientific (rarely economic) point of view. The circle of these key figures includes ecological activists who employ the term spirituality to oppose the lack of sensitivity, scientific cold calculation, and economic narrowness that for them characterizes the Western social model.

This type of eco-spirituality is just one among several we found. If we consider eco-spirituality to be a spectrum, the type we just described would be at one end. At the opposite end, we can place those forms of spirituality that emphasize local traditions and ancestral knowledge. For instance, Ernst Zürcher, the wood engineer we mentioned above, often refers to "the knowledge of the elders", remembering in particular his parents' lived religion in the Alps. As a scientist working on the influence of the moon on trees, he claims there are natural phenomena that cannot be explained by a scientific theory, which, however, "the elders knew", basing their effective practices on this knowledge. As a result of his bilingualism—German and French—he asks puzzling questions, such as why the name of a species of tree is male in German and female in French. His provisional answer refers to the Celtic past, as he found that when the name has a Celtic origin it is female. In some public presentations of his work we attended, we observed that he would often gender trees even when this did not correspond to scientific facts. When I asked him why he did that, he answered that that was a way to "communicate with the audience at a spiritual level". Between these two poles of eco-spirituality—one looking far away, the other for local roots—the variety is huge.

[4] E.g., United Nations Environment Program. Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity (Posey 1999).

Overall, however, it is safe to say that the links between ecology and the notion of "spirituality" strongly favour a holistic approach,[5] i.e., an idea of wholeness, inclusiveness, and universality, even though this perspective is firmly situated within a specific cultural context, namely the Western Global North (see Bell/Bevan 2021; Lucia 2020). The shift towards holistic understandings of eco-spirituality can be identified at the turn of the millennium, when analysing cultural productions (films, books, gatherings, public debates, comics, etc.) that played a cardinal role in disseminating spiritual references within ecological activism. The words of a woman active in a transition-focused[6] non-governmental organization financed by the established churches provides a clear illustration:

> "My spirituality at the moment is still not inspired by a religion. In fact, for me, it's different from religion. It's something that's more inherent. Religion is something that has been imagined, created by humans for humans, whereas spirituality is more a dimension of transcendence, living, that we can feed or not. I don't know how to explain that. There is a mysterious dimension, inherent to life in fact. For me, my spirituality today is very much the link with nature, with living, non-human beings—I love contact with animals, with trees.[7]

> "Also, spirituality in the sense of trying as much as possible to work on oneself, on one's inner postures in order to be as open as possible to the world, to release good energies towards the outside world, to move forward on one's path in consciousness, the Buddhists call it awakening, it's a bit of going towards that, doing this inner work that I started when I was a teenager, getting to know myself better, developing a maximum of the values of gratitude, happiness, joy, love, cooperation, mutual aid. For me, this is the basis of spirituality. Also, to take into account all forms of lives on earth, also mineral beings, plants, the earth as a whole, to develop respect in my daily practice for all these entities.

In both forms of contemporary eco-spirituality, whether the nature they enchant is far away or close, it is often given a positive, harmonious connotation. For instance, during the last ten years, the notion of "happy sobriety" has been reaching a growing audience. Launched by the French and Algerian agroecologist Pierre Rabhi (Rabhi 2010) it aims at raising awareness about waste and encouraging local production. Its diffusion was achieved through various media, such as the high-impact documentary "Demain" produced by Cyril Dion and Mélanie Laurent in 2015, which depicted the

[5] It should be remembered that the term "holistic" is also central to the field of ecology where its meaning is very different, as Pierre Charbonnier writes: "une démarche scientifique consistant à envisager le …système Terre comme la résultante des relations entre différentes parties qui ne sont pas simplement juxtaposées. Le caractère holistique de l'évolution planétaire est ce qui rend sa trajectoire si difficilement prévisible et si vulnérable […]" (Charbonnier 2022: 40–41). It is a scientific approach considering the Earth as a system resulting from relationships between different parts that are not simply juxtaposed but highly complex and unstable.

[6] The notion of transition encompasses the views of ecologists who consider that the current global economic and social situation is collapsing because of environmental damage caused by human activity and that society needs to transition to a new model by means of degrowth and resilience (Servigne/Stevens/Brown 2020: 236–237). Comprehensive outer (structural) and inner (emotional) work is necessary to abandon current living standards and launch a cultural and cosmological change. The network of transition towns (Transition Network 2022) is a good illustration of this and brings together many people who are actively practicing Joanna Macy's "work that reconnects". For Macy, "work that reconnects" "is a form of group work designed to foster the desire and ability to take part of the healing of our world". The experiential work follows a spiral sequence flowing through four stages beginning with gratitude, then, honouring the pain for the world, seeing with fresh eyes, and finally, going forth (Macy 2022). In Switzerland, a "Laboratory for inner transition" was created in 2016.

[7] This and all further excerpts from the interviews have been translated by the author.

current situation through the thesis of the collapse of humanity (Servigne/Stevens 2015) and featured activists such as Vandana Shiva offering concrete alternatives in France. Shiva's appeal to ecofeminism was published in French one year later (Shiva 2016), together with Joanna Macy's—a Doctor of Religious Studies, specialist in Buddhism and Deep Ecology[8]—proposal to work on the emotional impact of ecological issues (Macy/Johnstone 2012).

In Switzerland, Ernst Zürcher (Zürcher/Cantaloube 2021) recently published a book for children titled "À l'écoute de la forêt" ("Listening to the forest"). The book counters an anxiety-provoking image of the forest by depicting it as rich and powerful, but also in need of human help, an image of nature we found frequently in the field. In order to understand the social structures that underpin the observed cultural changes, I shall focus on life-course narratives that relate the progressive articulation between ecology and spirituality.

4. Eco-spiritual paths: from ecology to spirituality and vice versa

By means of guided biographical interviews and fieldwork conversations, our research team has collected life-course narratives of key local mediators of ethical views on ecology from a range of social spheres. Because these individuals often publicly mediate their ideas about ecology and spirituality, or translate texts on the subject from other language areas—mostly anglophone—we consider them, following Max Weber's concept, "cultural carriers" (Weber 1988: 15). Most of these interviewees have published extensively—both books and digital content—whether in a scientific or academic field or in the area of personal development. Their work ranges across eco-spiritual views on eco-psychology, creative nature-rituals inspired by neo-autochthony, neo-orientalism, esotericism, New Age[9] or goddess spiritualities, sacred places or enchanted views of "nature" close to what Bron Taylor (2010) has called *Dark Green Religion*, as well as Christian contemplation and liberation theology. Some of those who promote various types of spiritual ecologies across the networks we scrutinized may be considered akin to "moral entrepreneurs" (Becker 1963: 171–188), as they are frequently invited to public events, be they conferences, debates, roundtables, festivals or workshops. We met and interviewed these eco-spiritual activists, and we also studied their writings, which are often widely distributed.

We composed a corpus of texts transcribed from thematic and life-course interviews and from self-narratives provided by activists during conferences, which we were then able to deepen in face-to-face meetings. We submitted these narratives to a discourse and network analysis, some findings from which we shall now introduce. We observed that the activists meet at public ecological events where certain recurring principles are disseminated, such as the search for harmony, the values of gratuity, diversity, sobriety, non-violence, sober happiness, slowness, and often the willingness to go beyond social and political divisions.[10] We identified which temporalities were mentioned, which scripts were recurring, and which references were mobilized in the

[8] Together with John Seed, Pat Fleming, and Arne Naess, Macy edited the book *Thinking Like a Mountain: Toward a Council of All Beings*. The phrase "Thinking like a Mountain" (Seed et al. 1988), is hence a clear indication of Macy's lineage, as it comes from one of the chapters in Aldo Leopold's book *A Sand County Almanac* of 1949 (Leopold 1995). If Deep Ecology is the source of Macy's work, it clearly has a more religious dimension, drawing first on Buddhism and then on indigenous religiosities.

[9] See for instance the most recent book by one of our informants (Grasselli Meier 2021).

[10] This is confirmed by an analysis of the issues of *Moins!* a French-speaking journal of political ecology (published in Lausanne) that is widely distributed in the environmentalist circles we interacted with. See *Moins! Journal romand d'écologie politique* 2022.

description of the paths that lead ecologists to progressively integrate spiritual registers, and vice versa. It became clear that for all participants, the conjunction had occurred during adulthood and was not a product of upbringing. A quote from an interview made with a politically active young environmentalist is quite revealing:

> “I have a rather Christian past, Catholic, but it did not suit me. I even had confirmation, but it did not answer my thirst for knowledge, so I started exploring elsewhere, other religions or other spiritualities and after studying I travelled a lot in nature, and I experienced quite intense spiritual moments that were quite mystical for me, and I started to create strong links between nature and my inner self.

In what follows, I concentrate on the results of our analysis of 19 interviews, representing a range of profiles from the broad eco-spiritual network. I have selected these key figures of the urban eco-activist milieu in view of their positions in the eco-spiritual networks we observed and their visibility at various venues we attended.

To understand how to characterize the social and personal path towards eco-spirituality, we considered whether the individuals we observed mentioned particular social triggers, such as existential ruptures, structural changes in their life course, or major historical events, leading them to make a commitment in both the spiritual and ecological fields. We contextualized the conjunction of spiritual and ecological commitment in a given individual’s life course in terms of their sociological profile. It is quite surprising that no study in the sociology of religion[11] has yet focused on the way in which an individual's personal ecological commitment is articulated with their spiritual commitment during their life course, i.e., how spirituality is integrated with an existing ecological commitment or vice versa.

Using qualitative discourse analysis based on the coding of text segments,[12] we captured the stories of how individuals became committed to leading projects in areas such as energy transition, permaculture, or complementary and local currency, which also involved religious or spiritual references. We reconstructed the theological, religious, or spiritual backgrounds of the interviewees. We applied the standard sociological distinction among the different phases of socialization (Becci 2012) and also linked the moments and modes of entry into ecology and spirituality to biographical ruptures. We focused on practices and situations that explicitly articulated ecology and religion, i.e., those that had a spiritual and ecological double use, marked by terms such as “holistic”, “vibrations”, “cosmic”, “Gaia”, “the living”, and “nature” (see Di Marco/Cruz 2018) that have a different meaning in a religious and in a secular context. We collected information on age and gender, professional background, educational level, and religious socialization.

Our analysis shows that these are pioneering social actors, who emphasize the importance of transmitting their approach, imbuing transmission with an almost sacred character. One young mother activist told us in the following way how she plans to transmit her approach to sustainability within the farm she takes care of, which belongs to the city: “Support ordinary people to become actors of change for a sustainable world. And we work on three axes: The head, the hands, and the

[11] The French sociologist Mathieu Gervais (2020) also documented the paths of peasants involved in organic farming in a biographical approach in his PhD thesis, with a focus on the link between peasant identity and ecology.

[12] Using MAXQDA software.

heart to understand how to act and change." The models she mentions are transition towns and permaculture, although she found out about these only after making connections in the movements and by meeting Californian ecofeminist activist and neopagan Starhawk. As is the case for most interviewees, she explains that her parents were not environmentalists and that she developed her awareness as a teenager.

In terms of practical activities, all our subjects aim at being respectful of the environment, drawing on ideals of a "happy sobriety" and sustainable degrowth. Their ecological vision contains an ambition and a utopia that proposes to attempt to redefine or overcome numerous cultural boundaries and hierarchies, such as those between nature and culture, human genders, or forms of knowledge.

However, by analysing the positions and discourses of these key mediating figures within the eco-spiritual network, we could identify one main distinction between two types of paths: Those who began with a commitment to ecology to which they added a spiritual dimension, and those who began with a religious or spiritual practice, which they gradually placed within an ecological framework. We will call the former spiritual ecologists and the latter ecological spiritualists. Once we established this distinction, we wanted to understand how ecologists become spiritual or, vice versa, how spiritual people become ecologists, and how these two registers were articulated in the past, how they are expressed today, whether one feeds the other, whether common events—biographical, collective, or cultural—trigger the articulation, and whether these articulations have a common temporality.

First, we found that a number of ecologists drew closer to spirituality by becoming acquainted with ideas of permaculture, "happy sobriety", eco-psychology, or "dark ecology" (Morton 2016) and by experiencing the limits of scientific practice. They are mostly men, institutionally well integrated, Swiss nationals, employed or retired, between 35 and 65 years of age.

Second, those who were initially active in the field of spirituality and who have progressively articulated their practice with ecology did so via spiritualities containing neo-animistic practices and exotic views of nature, New Age beliefs, and neo-shamanism or neo-paganism. This segment includes more women, who are usually under the age of retirement and live according to alternative values.

5. Eco-spiritual paths: From ecology to spirituality and vice versa

As far as the sociological profiles of the selected interviewees are concerned, none belong to racialized groups; all range in age from their early thirties to over seventy, with a fairly even distribution within that range; the majority are men; all have completed tertiary education and enjoy privileged levels of socio-cultural capital; and they are all either engaged in teaching, scientific research or liberal and caring professions.

In order to create contrasts in our analysis, and to better situate the specificity of the eco-spiritual actors, we added to our corpus interviews with four other actors representing a cultural environmentalism (film, museums, media, art) that is not explicitly spiritual. The interest of including these "control" persons was to present external views that contrast with our observation of spiritualization.

These four actors[13] are the director and founder of the Zurich-based Green Film Festival/Films pour la terre, whose website states they have been screening "inspiring environmental documentaries" throughout Switzerland since 2008,[14] and that one of their key value is to be "confessionally and politically neutral";[15] the director of the Valais Nature Museum, the first museum in Europe to have created an entire exhibition room on the Anthropocene; a philosopher and historian of science, professor emeritus at the University Institute of Development Studies in Geneva and a member of numerous committees and initiatives in the field of the Anthropocene; and finally, a philosopher and biologist, honorary professor of industrial ecology at the University of Lausanne, who has also been an economic and scientific journalist and a sustainability advisor to numerous industries in French-speaking Switzerland and elsewhere. On a personal level, these people may well have spiritual sensitivities, even in relation to ecology, but they do not mobilize them in their professional discourse. We consider these men to be cultural ecologists.

The level of ecological commitment of our interviewees varied. Spiritual views and practices integrating ecology with notions of "inner transition" that refer to Macy's idea of a work that reconnects (Monnot/Grandjean 2021) and "deep ecology" (Næss 1973) were found across both the subject group and the control group. For all of them, trial and error has played a role in the search for effective and meaningful ecological activism, which underlines the lack of significant models that they have encountered in their life courses. Ecological spiritualists are more often committed to making their daily practices sustainable (Pruvost 2021), pursuing "happy sobriety" via an alternative way of life, often within smaller communities or foundations. For spiritual ecologists, ecological engagement is more about issues on a certain institutional scale, in areas such as urban planning, demographic planning, or energy production.

Instead of postulating an inherent connection between spirituality and ecology, our social scientific perspective seeks to explore how this articulation has come about during the course of individual lives. In analysing the interviews, one crucial point was to trace whether the articulation occurred around precise biographical, cultural, or historical events and, if so, at which point the subject started to be aware of this articulation as such. If the ecological commitment was triggered by a specific event, either historical or biographical, we identified the year when ecological awareness began. In this regard, all the interviewees talked of having already developed an awareness during their childhood or adolescence, and then experiencing an acceleration and concretization of this awareness after 2000, and often even after 2010. The concrete beginning of the articulation between ecology and spirituality is thus around 2010 for most spiritual ecologists and ecological spiritualists, often during a training course, while reading, or at a meeting.

The interviewees constructed their stories during their conversation with us by interpreting moments, events, or actions that happened earlier in their lives. They use contemporary notions to characterize their spiritual paths: A transition activist confided to us that it was "as a teenager" that he "discovered eco-psychology", while a practitioner of the "sacred feminine" (Rimlinger 2021) begins her ecological biography by telling us that she "was a vegetarian at the age of 15".

[13] We also interviewed two environmentalists in St. Louis, Senegal. One young participant in the climate-strike movement Fridays for Future and an agroecologist running a farm and adhering to the Colibri movement. As they are outside of the territory of our fieldwork and we did not have time to do proper fieldwork during the two weeks spent in Senegal, we do not include them in the main research data.

[14] See Association Films pour la terre 2022a.

[15] See Association Films pour la terre 2022b.

These earlier experiences, which receive new meanings and interpretations during the narration (the second subject here would not call herself a vegetarian when she was 15), can in part be brought into the realm of contemporary spirituality, without necessarily inscribing it in a lineage or tradition. We observed that triggering events in childhood played a role for spiritual and cultural ecologists (one interviewee mentioned the importance of a book about the formation of the earth he read as a child and carried with him until adulthood), but also more recent events, often related to alternative health and bodily practices, such as when being introduced to "traditional Chinese medicine" by a relative, or inspired by a film on the environment (e.g. *Gandhi* from 1982 or *An Inconvenient Truth* from 2006). These events pushed people towards new ways of seeing the world, understanding it, asking questions. They lead first to an "openness to much more oriental things" despite a "very Cartesian position at the base" as the director of the Valais Nature Museum explains, then to a holistic discourse on ecology, that does however not necessarily mean that the subject immediately becomes an eco-spiritual activist. For people who are more strongly integrated into institutions, the significant events tend to be of a more personal nature, while activists who are less a part of the establishment and often more politicized often mention ruptures with institutions as triggering moments, as I shall elaborate further on.

Spiritual ecologists active in a network we identified concerned with inner transition[16] often came to a certain awareness by means of scientific study, whereas ecological spiritualists tended to integrate ecological views alongside holistic practices (yoga courses, forest baths, experiences with astrology, the reading of texts on Hinduism and Buddhism, in particular by Jiddu Krishnamurti). The latter often described new bodily experiences they had in connection with growing environmental consciousness. During holistic practices they make analogies across species and scales, such as between humans and trees, aging and the seasons, bodily pain and natural disasters, and this experience is considered to be spiritual. The body is often gendered, as in the discourse of a spiritual practitioner who offers rituals based on seasonal rhythms for women, who informs us, for example, that "it was this sensitivity to my body as a woman and to the body of the earth that was my first link with […] ecotherapy".

We observed that numerous encounters offering such experiences occur during public environmental events, where one can participate for free in shamanic drum sessions, yoga laughter circles, meditation, etc. Such events have played a crucial and complementary role in linking one commitment to another, for instance by offering the possibility of openly and thoroughly approaching the topics of transforming daily practices in a sustainable way, starting from childbirth with the help of midwives, to education (for example, through Steiner Waldorf schools), organic and closed-circuit food, beekeeping, slow sex,[17] and even death rituals.

It was during environmental events in recent years that we met several of the people involved and were able to follow them in their practices. Our contextual analysis has shown that the frequency and scale of these public events have increased sharply since the 2010s, which has gone hand in hand with an intensification of the visibility and public reception of the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the IPCC, which began in 1990. Overall, then, there is no single major cultural or biographical event that marks the beginning of spiritual investment,

[16] See *Arborescence. Un programme de vulgarisation scientifique 2022* for some illustrations of activists' discourses of this network.

[17] Topics covered by the *Moins! Journal romand d'écologie politique* since its birth in 2012.

but a spread of dates from childhood in the 1950s and 1970s to 2012, and then an acceleration in the frequency of such events. In those we observed, most of the activities proposed were related to health, dance, sexuality, healing, well-being, childbirth, the female cycle.

6. The weakness of religious socialization and the strength of eco-spiritual creativity

In terms of religious socialization, all but two of our interviewees have a link to Christianity through their primary socialization. Cultural and spiritual ecologists within the transition network mention that the Christian affiliation of their parents combined with weak Christian practice ended in a personal detachment from religious institutions. Those spiritual ecologists in our study who come from families affiliated to the Catholic or Protestant churches—or sometimes both, in the case of a mixed marriage—received a Christian socialization, often up to adolescence, during which they went through the rite of confirmation. From their youth onwards, however, they all disassociated themselves from it. Most were baptized, attended religious events irregularly as children and developed an increasingly detached relationship to religion during their early adulthood. These people all describe having experienced a moment of disappointment, disillusionment, and a break with the religious tradition of their childhood, especially in relation to the moral positions defended by the church hierarchies. They tell of having experienced a break for various reasons: The modernization of religious traditions abandoning the "mystical and ritual component" at their core, a religious discourse considered hypocritical, in particular with regard to divorce. Two people in the transition network had ecclesiastical functions (pastor, deacon) before experiencing a rupture. Apart from one person who converted to Christian orthodoxy and is now working for an ecumenical organization, none of our subjects currently identifies with a specific religious group. The distancing from institutionalized forms of religiosity is linked particular closely to the experience of biographical ruptures, such as divorce or illness.

Beyond biographical events, breaks with institutions (for example a university or employer, but also ecological institutions considered too bureaucratic, such as the WWF, etc.) also often trigger a movement towards new ways of seeing the world, understanding it, and asking questions. Indeed, several people active in the transition network mention having been active in the WWF. It is therefore through a series of events—sometimes personal, such as the birth of one's own children, illnesses, divorces, professional changes; and sometimes public—that eco-spiritual activists discover whichever aspect was not present at first in their personal belief system, i.e., ecology or spirituality, respectively. This also occurs in a mobile manner, as described by Edio Soares with the concept of religious foraging (see Soares 2009).

In the accounts of the ecological spiritualists, the spiritual transformation more often started at a lower level of primary religious socialization. The practice of meditation or yoga is viewed more as being in continuity with a quest to get away from the environmental vicissitudes of the modern world. Healing becomes central and is attained through trips to particular natural places or participation in activities, courses, and training days, but also through the practice of care (given or received).

We identified a wide variety of meanings and practices related to spirituality in the discourses of ecological spiritualists. They use notions and ideas drawn from neo-animist, neo-pagan/neo-shamanist, or new-age worldviews, reflecting Achille Mbembe's (2020) point that "[…] God's

absence is hardly what characterizes today's world. Neither is God's virulent and vengeful presence, in the form of the violence of a virus or other natural calamities, the distinctive features of our times. The hallmark of the beginning of the twenty-first century is the swing into animism" (Mbembe 2020: 1). For him, however, animism is nowadays no longer "considered a relic of the obscurantism of so-called primitive societies" but is totally compatible with contemporary modern culture ((Mbembe 2020: 1). These worldviews were therefore neither adopted through primary nor even early secondary socialization, but later in the biographical journey. It is therefore particularly important to identify the stages and locations of this socialization to contemporary spirituality, which we have described as subtle. A commitment to spirituality in more recent adult life is narrated as being linked to what was already present during childhood, or even adolescence: A spiritual feeling, born from emotions or encounters. It is, however, only during adulthood that such an event is called spiritual.

Today, as our study confirms, the most frequently named spiritual practices are meditation, of which there are many variations, and travelling to natural sites. Central to the spiritual orientation of all eco-spiritual people is, as one interviewee puts it, the active search for a link "between the personal, intimate self and the universal", and thus a search for connections between different scales, i.e., the micro and macro, local and global, body and universe etc. Thus, while there are many subtle differences between spiritual ecologists and ecological spiritualists in terms of the stress that each place on the immanent or transcendent dimensions of life, we found that the core values each tradition stresses depended on their structural capital. Activists in the transition network, who rely on considerable social capital, stress the importance of humility as an eco-spiritual value, while neo-pagan practitioners or activists close to Starhawk's wicca movement stressed "empowerment".[18] In the first case, the target audience rarely needs to be encouraged with regard to empowerment, while in the second case, freedom of action, freedom from dependency, or strength of mind is a central concern for the many young women discovering eco-spirituality. These nuances in the significance of eco-spirituality are important because they not only allow actors to assert their particularity amongst a variety of eco-spiritual practitioners, but also reflect their structural position in the overall field of environmentalism.

7. The link to legitimating institutions (education, profession, gender)

While distinctions drawn in terms of spirituality become blurred at some point, clearer differences can be distinguished in terms of how "eco-spiritual" activists relate to their professional environment. The spiritual ecologists, especially those from the transition network and eco-psychology, emphasize the importance of their academic or other credentials. They often work for an NGO or a non-profit foundation in a professional role or in institutions such as schools, the WWF, or the Federal Office for the Environment. The ecological spiritualists, by contrast, i.e., those who are close to New Age movements and global animism, tend to mention their time in such institutions (diplomacy, banks, ICRC) only while explaining why they left and became independent. People from neo-shamanic or neo-pagan backgrounds, and especially women, frequently emphasize the artistic aspects of their current and past professions (for instance, music therapist). In their narratives, the "cultural" ecologists emphasize the institutional character of their work and the fact that their path is validated by scientific institutions.

[18] For the notion of empowerment as emancipation, see Bacqué/Biewener 2013.

The professor emeritus from Geneva and the director of the Nature Museum in Valais were both keen to emphasize where their discourse remained "institutional and academic".

By considering the structural capital that these actors possess, i.e., their level of education, training, institutional integration, and insertion in local social networks, it is possible to organize them along two axes: A link to validating institutions and educational attainment. Most of the interviewees have a high level of education. Most of those in the transition network have pursued doctoral studies (in educational sciences, philosophy, economics, theology, and history), whereas most ecological spiritualists who have attended university have not progressed beyond a bachelor's degree (philosophy, ethnology). Those who did not attend university or did not complete a degree, which was especially the case for the women we met, had often undergone vocational training in social and cultural fields. Men are more likely to be backed by institutional scientific validation and high levels of education (mainly PhDs and professorship) and are recognized as experts in the field of ecology. In the course of their careers, most cultural ecologists have supplemented their professional qualifications with further technical skills in the area of communication (web design or didactics and pedagogy). Positions in academia, politics, and NGOs have benefited these "moral entrepreneurs" by providing them with credentials, institutional resources, and public legitimacy. The link to established (scientific or cultural) institutions plays an important role in the fabrication of eco-spirituality, and in particular to its diffusion, by indirectly providing the backing of institutional legitimacy. We also found that forest engineers, experts in biochemistry and political ecology, and academic philosophers are strong diffusers of eco-spiritual views.

Especially in the early years of our research, we were surprised to find that the speakers invited to talk about ecology and spirituality at public events were mostly men. Their presence was legitimized in terms of their expertise on ecological issues. A gender gap continues to exist in science, and women are heavily underrepresented (Schwaiger et al. 2021). The fact that spirituality plays such a major role in this field did not make a significant difference to the status conferred to these assertive senior scientists as a consequence of their institutional legitimacy (Becci/Grandjean 2022).

To sum up, almost all our interviewees have a high level of both education and institutional integration (the few who did not attend university have training in social or cultural professions). A significant proportion of the spiritual ecologists possess doctoral degrees (in fields including education, philosophy, economics, biochemistry, and history). By contrast, those we identified as starting from the spiritual side and moving towards ecology, if they attended university at all, do not possess qualifications above a bachelor's degree (philosophy, ethnology) and do not mobilize those qualifications in their activities.

The eco-spiritual activists in the network we analysed express a particular commitment to transmitting a holistic approach to ecology. According to them, this transmission is crucial for human survival and is not something that existing institutions can guarantee. Yet while spiritual ecologists often value institutional attachment as a means of legitimizing their position as experts, for ecological spiritualists, it is rather the break with institutions that frequently characterize their life course. While it is usually ecological spiritualists who create eco-spiritual practices and ideas, these are reinterpreted and adapted by spiritual ecologists, who expand their reach and promote diffusion.

8. The centrality of emotions and healing

In their narratives, the interviewees regularly linked their spiritual commitment as adults to something that was already present in childhood or adolescence: A spiritual feeling, born from emotions or encounters. Emotions take a central place in these eco-spiritual narratives, influenced by the Lovelockian vision of the Earth as a physiological system exhibiting dynamic and integrated behaviour. Bruno Latour, extending Michel Serres' proposal (Serres 1990), considers this cultural change to be as significant as the revolution of Galileo, who was forbidden by the Holy Inquisition to teach that the Earth "moves". Whereas the ideas of James Lovelock and then Lynn Margulis about the Earth system were reviled in the 1960s and 70s, today it seems plausible to believe that the Earth is "moved". The role of emotions is manifold. Not only are activists learning to express and qualify emotions in relation to environmental issues, for example in the "work that reconnects" workshops inspired by Joanna Macy (Macy/Johnstone 2018), but they also draw on these spiritual practices to find emotional resources for activism. As Christophe Traïni (2020) found when studying French animal-rights activists, such long-term activism strongly relies on shared experience in the group that "offrent aux militants l'occasion d'éprouver des émotions qui confortent (ou non) l'intensité de leur engagement" (Traïni 2020: 308).[19] In the settings we observed, the imprint of Joanna Macy's "work that reconnects" is huge. Reference to this method is often associated with eco-psychological practice, and it is often considered a synonym of eco-spirituality itself, particularly among activists in the transition network. As one of the members of the "Inner Transition Laboratory" put it during an interview held in Lausanne in May 2022,[20] it is a spirituality totally linked to militant commitment: "There's this big question for activists: Exhaustion. You want to do a lot of things, to be everywhere and in the end, you end up exhausted …. Without this [spiritual] part, I would quickly fall into eco-anxiety or over-consumption to fill existential voids …. In eco-anxiety, this is one of the great remedies: To be in action and find meaning in what you do." The practice of "work that reconnects" offers not only a thought to hold on to but also concrete gestures and actions.

For one of the founders of the French-speaking "Inner Transition Lab", there is little difference between these two postures, both of which involve "man's interiority as a means of change". He explained to us that during his numerous conferences, he spoke of eco-spirituality when the audience was close to religious institutions, and of eco-psychology when the audiences were more secularized. "I don't feel that I am betraying my cause by trying to meet the other person where he or she is, and by speaking a language that he or she can understand", he said when asked how he distinguishes between the two registers to avoid misunderstandings. Using humour, he also emphasized the importance of professional skills: "Fourteen years of parliamentary lobbying have taught me to adapt my language to anyone."

When we interviewed one of the activists of the "Inner Transition Lab", a woman manager of an organic farm and a socio-cultural centre belonging to the city of Lausanne in October 2018, she specified that the

[19] My translation: "Offer activists the opportunity to experience emotions that reinforce (or not) the intensity of their commitment."

[20] Interview carried out by Jonas Ruffieux, in the context of Irene Becci's seminar, "Gender and Spirituality in Ecological Engagement", Spring 2022 [author's translation].

> “inner transition is […] at the service of the outer transition and not the other way round […] and not just navel-gazing […] that’s why Starhawk is probably the person who in my eyes best articulates this […] to be emotionally uh recognized or in any case […] to recognize the harm it does to us to see nature […] being affected […] we spiritually […] have a great need to have connections etc. I personally also have a great need for this […] but it allows me to be a source of energy for my action in the world.

In the narratives of the ecological activists interviewed, the idea of a transforming and thereby healing self is very present. A link is made throughout the different narratives between the personal, political, and global levels, reflecting an understanding of ecology as primarily relational rather than solely technical. Eco-spiritual practices are experienced as “the missing link between what I was experiencing on the inner level and then the social transformation”, says an expert in sustainable urban development active in the transition network. The eco-spiritual narratives offer a coherent reading, linking distant objects, such as the “right to food, the ethical economy […] the vision of values”.

A “political commitment […] in the broadest sense of the term”, as the former director of the Swiss Federal Office for the Environment from the 1990s until 2005, now retired, explains, “would not be enough to achieve the objective”, which is much broader, i.e., “to re-establish harmony between humanity and nature”. A doctor in biochemistry, his commitment was initially political, within the Christian Center Party, and it was only after he left that organization that his media appearances and publications began to reflect a Romantic, nostalgic, and even spiritual outlook in public, in relation, for instance to his personal experience of how the countryside where he grew up is gradually being eaten away by urbanization. In the early 2010s, the media described his spiritual sensitivity as displaying a “penchant for esotericism”,[21] whereby esotericism was loaded with a negative connotation.[22] His recovery from brain cancer in 2007 was widely publicized,[23] paving the way for a more open public sharing of his spiritual practices, such as forest meditation.[24] We observed a similar change in the way spirituality related to trees is framed in the media between the 1990s and today, following the interventions by Ernst Zürcher.

9. Conclusion

Even in a territory as small as Switzerland, there is no single form of eco-spirituality that crosses time and culture, but rather a variety of eco-spiritual practices and visions that are implemented by actors of different origins and religious socialization. A critical reflection based on ethnographic fieldwork has made it possible to highlight the cultural dynamics contained in the claims of a spiritual approach to nature and ecology. We have seen that the notion of spirituality is socially constructed around sensations. We have paid attention to the social triggers—existential ruptures, structural changes, historical events—through which eco-spiritual activists have articulated the double commitment. Our analysis has clearly shown that eco-spiritual action articulates not only two social universes—ecological and religious/spiritual—but also different scales of action: Societal, communal, and individual. While this idea of wholeness seems to be highly inclusive, we noticed

[21] See the programme *Pardonnez-moi* on the Public Swiss Television broadcast on February 1, 2009, and Lachat 2012.
[22] See Häfliger 2013; Birrer 2016.
[23] See the *Infrarouge* programme on the French-speaking Swiss Television RTS 2018.
[24] His perspective on his journey can be found in his own writings. See, e.g., Roch 2009; Roch 2015; Bourg/Roch 2010; Bourg/Roch 2012.

that it ultimately circulated only in a milieu of individuals possessing significant social and cultural capital. Although the references to forms of spirituality are very different, there are a few key elements common to most of these forms. Firstly, they are inhabited by a tension of scales. A very intimate bodily dimension or personal biographical reference is often juxtaposed with a generalized notion of authenticity and sacred nature. A further jump in scale is made between references to exotic (such as shamans, first peoples, "natives" in the Western world) and local figures. The example of the participation of what have been referred to as "bio-shamans", a term that conflates two fundamentally different universes, at a winter festival held on an ecological farm in Geneva in 2018 illustrates this leap of scale. Shamans and other exotic and spiritual figures contribute to framing a milieu that opposes what is perceived as the "technical-secular" world or "institutional religion", in other words, what Jürgen Habermas (Habermas 1984) referred to as the process of extension of technics and instrumental rationality into the lifeworld. This jump in scale creates, secondly, a feeling of connection, a connection that it is otherwise impossible to establish, and which often translates into the idea that "everything is connected" (Chamel 2018), between different parts of the living world: Human, animal, vegetable, mineral. Various proposals thus aim to pool, synchronize, or indicate the contemporaneity of otherwise disparate and individual ritual practices such as meditation, introspection, and dream journeys. The different actors can find themselves in a holistic vision of the world. The shift from the very intimate and personal to the very distant and remote—in part exotic—level allows for a relatively easy transformation of universal principles and views into concrete practices, since the intermediate—cultural and institutional—levels are rarely articulated as a theme. Ecological issues are brought to a very concrete level by means of different kinds of mediation, focusing variously on the body, emotions, sense experiences, or scientific knowledge. From a social science perspective, as Louis Quéré reminds us by quoting Maurice Halbwachs (Quéré 2021: 131–2), emotions are not purely a psychological product, but are "subject to a real social discipline, because in the presence of events of a certain kind, and in such circumstances as often occur, it is society itself that tells us how we should react. Or rather, it is not only a question of how we should express our feelings, […] but of the feeling and of the emotion itself: Society expects us to [experience it], itself commands us to feel it" (Halbwachs [1934]2014: 44). Environmental damage affects young people in Switzerland in a particularly acute way. According to a medical study conducted in Switzerland and Liechtenstein in 2021, among young people, "27.9 per cent are worried about the future" (Barrense-Dias/Chok/Surís Granell 2021: 33). Eco-anxiety and solastalgia are repeatedly mentioned in activists' meetings and in public.[25] Throughout this text, I have described individual profiles as specific and contextual. At the same time, my intention has been to show to what extent they are part of—and reveal—social logics that are constructed by the infrastructures of our societies. To conclude, I wish to stress how important it is for social scientists to study the mediations and social infrastructures (in the sense used by Burchardt (2020: 93–122)) that shape the phenomenological experience of the human and other-than-human world.

[25] See, e.g., the film produced in Geneva and shown at the Solothurn Film Festival, as elsewhere, by Frédéric Choffat *Tout commence* (Les Films Du Tigre 2022).

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