Practically Natural

Religious Resources for Environmental Pragmatism

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While the boundary between the study of religion and philosophy can be blurred, there is often a strong distinction between environmental philosophers and scholars of religion concerned with environmental issues. This essay seeks to build bridges across this boundary by arguing that pragmatic philosophers and religion scholars have much to learn from one another. Using discussions of sustainability as our primary focus, we will present the insights of environmental philosophers who are working toward a pragmatist environmental ethic and develop an argument about the importance of religion to their project.

We propose three methodological moves that we believe will facilitate a robust discussion between philosophical pragmatists and scholars of religion and nature: (1) Attention to experience in general and religious experience in particular is a vital bridge between the values and behaviors that have received philosophical attention. (2) Neither

1. Our thanks to the editors for their careful reading of the text and suggestions for improvement.

2. We use the term "religion and nature" to refer to the field of scholarship under discussion in this book, and the overlaps and distinctions between religion and ecology and religion and nature are discussed elsewhere in this volume. From a pragmatic perspective the term "nature" has greater heuristic value than "ecology" because it allows reflection on a broader range of phenomena. While both terms have their appeal
religious nor environmental communities should be understood as private or insular; rather both must be studied with special attention to the ways they communicate their narratives and beliefs beyond their own communities. (3) Philosophers and religious studies scholars alike must make the pragmatic move of studying religion with primary attention to its impacts upon society and the world. With these proposals, we advocate a move toward a more pragmatic study of religion and nature and a more sensitive study of religion among pragmatists.

The Philosophical Environmental Ethics Background

In part, environmental pragmatism emerged in reaction to a common theme in philosophical environmental ethics: the idea that values exert a causal influence on behaviors—that if humans get values right, practices will follow. Many of the early conversation among environmental ethicists involved debates regarding the importance of establishing a non-anthropocentric environmental ethic. Led by scholars such as Bryan Norton, environmental pragmatists challenged scholars who imagined this to be the primary ethical task. They suggested that the focus on generating a single ethic that could account for all moral quandaries faced by human societies was unhelpful, arguing instead that a non-anthropocentric ethic is just one rather narrow approach to formulating an environmental ethics, and that any uniform system is unlikely to be able to account for the variety of ethical perspectives evidenced in the general populace.

Related to this debate over non-anthropocentric ethics were other philosophical debates about the locus of value (does value inhere in particular entities or does it originate in the one evaluating value?), and whether ethical monism or pluralism is the superior approach. On the one hand, monists advocated bio-centric or eco-centric ethical theories that were imagined as guiding or significantly informing environmental behavior. On the other hand, pluralists suggested that several different,

and their drawbacks, (e.g., nature is considered too vague and ill-defined by many environmental scientists), the religion and nature conversation has considered not only what is encompassed under the rubric of “environment” (what surrounds humans) or “ecology” (scientifically measurable interacting "systems"), but also questions of what is "natural" and what is not, and how these determinations are made.

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even competing theories of value related to nature should be considered.4
Monist non-anthropocentrists, Norton contended, imagined their task too narrowly as "throwing fully formed theories and principles over the edge of the ivory tower, to be used as intellectual armaments by the currently outgunned environmental activists."5

Norton attempted an important bridge between these perspectives in Toward Unity Among Environmentalists (1991) when he suggested that, despite significant disagreements about the locus of value and the shapes of their respective ethical systems, anthropocentrists and non-anthropocentrists would in many cases ultimately concur on the proper policy processes and outcomes. Norton's point was based on his assumption that people do not perceive and negotiate real life moral quandaries first or foremost through the lens of an overarching ethical theory.

However, the preoccupation with the idea that theories of value (particularly metaphysical ones) are the primary shapers of environmental behaviors has persisted within environmental and religious studies. It is often traced to the historian Lynn White, Jr.'s claim that the Judeo-Christian worldview exhibited an elective affinity for particularly invasive agricultural technologies, buttressing the now-dominant "d- 

ominion" interpretation of the mandate in Genesis to subdue the earth.6 White's thesis has been challenged, however. For example, James Proctor and Evan Berry have pointed out that inferring a causal relationship between broad social behaviors and individual religious beliefs is dubious.7 In addition, recent studies indicate that although up to 80 percent of Americans express resonance with pro-environmental values, less than 20 percent of those concerned actually act upon those values.8 If these surveys and scholars are accurate, then the idea that religious values determine ecological behaviors is suspect. It is this apparent gap between

4. See Weston, "Beyond Intrinsic Value"; Stone, "Moral Pluralism"; Light and Katz, Environmental Pragmatism; Wenz, "Minimal, Moderate, and Extreme Moral Pluralism"; Norton, Searching for Sustainability; and Light, "Callicott and Naess."


6. White, "Historical Roots," 1203-7. The idea that there is a Judeo-Christian worldview has been called into question, and important criticisms highlight that the idea that Christianity is the fulfillment of Jewish tradition derives from a particular and partisan Protestant interpretation of this history. We are aware of and generally in accord with such critiques, but we use the term here because it was used by the scholars that are the objects of our discussion.


8. Duke University, "Survey."
moral vision and practical action, and the flaccidity of environmental philosophy with regard to public policy, which fertilized the soil for the emergence of environmental pragmatism.

Environmental Pragmatism: An Overview

Given this context, it is possible to articulate more clearly what we mean when we refer to environmental pragmatism. Drawing on philosophical pragmatism, particularly the work of William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, and John Dewey, environmental pragmatists have maintained that many formulations of environmental ethics which depend upon bio-centric or eco-centric ethics are, as Ben Minteer put it, “too ontologically and epistemologically flawed to be philosophically persuasive, and that [non-anthropocentrism] is a politically ineffective and ultimately unnecessary position.”9 Although some self-styled environmental pragmatists such as Andrew Light suggest that they are methodological pragmatists, and only loosely related genealogically to American philosophical pragmatism, most concur that their focus is a sort of productive social therapy, whereby the terms of debate among various constituencies are clarified and held up for scrutiny in the public sphere. Driving these scholars is the perception that, while environmental philosophy emerged as a field of study around the early 1970s, it has produced few tangible results in terms of policy outcomes and sustainable cultural behaviors. For example, Light and Katz noted that “the intramural debates of environmental philosophers although interesting, provocative and complex, seem to have no real impact on the deliberations of environmental scientists, activists, and policy-makers.”10

To move toward a minimal definition, Light and Katz offered four key modes of environmental pragmatism in the introduction to their edited volume *Environmental Pragmatism*:

1. Examinations into the connections between classical American philosophical pragmatism and environmental issues.

2. The articulation of practical strategies for bridging gaps between environmental theorists, policy analysts, activists, and the public;

3. Theoretical investigations into the overlapping normative bases of specific environmental organizations and movements, for the purposes of providing grounds for the convergence of activists on policy choices; and among these theoretical debates,

4. General arguments for theoretical and meta-theoretical moral pluralism in environmental normative theory.\textsuperscript{11}

In addition, environmental pragmatism, particularly the sort that is strongly influenced by the American philosophers who birthed it, is a \textit{problem-centered} approach that begins with particularly recalcitrant public environmental problems (i.e., climate change, restoration of ecosystems, etc.), and moves toward generating the political structures that can solve them.\textsuperscript{12}

All four of these aims are integrated in Bryan Norton's 2005 book, \textit{Sustainability}, the most systematic and philosophically sophisticated expression of environmental pragmatism to date. Norton suggests that political and social processes should be guided by a philosophy of adaptive ecosystem management. Norton's grasp of the relevant literature across a range of disciplines is noteworthy and he has a gift for building productive bridges between them. For example, he makes use of the philosophy of adaptive management, pioneered by ecologists H. T. Odum and C.S. Holling (among others), with special attention to the role of hierarchy theory (derived from general systems theory) as understood by Holling.\textsuperscript{13} These perspectives were joined with a pragmatic philosophical approach that focused on democratic processes.

But how does a problem-based and pluralistic political deliberation process include religious values? We now turn to this question, which has been given insufficient attention by scholars outside religious studies, in part because the definitions of religions exercised by those outside this discipline are, ironically, often more restrictive than those deployed by religious studies scholars.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, 5.

\textsuperscript{12} Norton, interview, June 29, 2009.

\textsuperscript{13} Many consider Howard T. Odum to be one of the primary contributors to the development of adaptive management. However, Norton argues that Odum was a systems ecologist, and while he paid attention to the social aspects of ecological problems, he was less attuned to political processes than was Holling (interview, June 29, 2009).
Sustainability, Pragmatism, and Religion

In his recent work, Norton applied his pragmatist approach to the contested idea of "sustainability." This is a challenge: When oil companies, international political bodies, the Sierra Club, radical environmentalist, and indigenous organizations all use sustainability (or some variation of it) to describe their agendas and goals, it is vitally important that there be more focused investigation into particular deployments of the term and the values these uses imply. It is the dizzying variety of different understandings of sustainability that prompted Norton to propose a constructive social science research program, one engaged in developing "a new kind of integrative social science."  

Norton recognized that pluralism inevitably leads to "a range of values from consumptive to transformative to spiritual." He argued that "[sustainability's] meaning . . . is intimately tied to the values of the community that uses the term. This view is contrary of course, to that of economists and others who seek a 'purely descriptive' concept of sustainability." Instead, Norton offered what he called a *schematic definition* of sustainability, which included as foci four categories of "sustainability values": 1) community-procedural values, 2) weak sustainability (economic) values, 3) risk-avoidance values, and 4) community identity values. Such a schematic definition characterizes and relates the key components of a definition [of sustainability] while leaving specification of the substance of

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15. Ibid, 373.
16. Ibid, 386. By "purely descriptive," Norton means a concept of sustainability that uses a universal formula to achieve sustainability in particular situations, by—to use one example from ecological economics—assigning contingent values to ecological entities, and summing the costs and benefits of preserving or exploiting them. Purely descriptive definitions of sustainability may be helpful in some cases, but for Norton they are inadequate in the long run since they do not attend to the other important types of values that he believes are essential for sustainability (Ibid, 379–99).
17. Ibid, 365–71. The first set of values is concerned primarily with the political processes that allow appropriate values to be vetted for community analysis and revision. The second attends to economic assessments of values, acknowledging their importance for both human well-being and political traction. The third refers to creating opportunities to increase social resilience when faced with both external and internal disruptions. Finally, community identity values are those embraced by particular communities of accountability and which they find to be central to what it means to belong to that particular community.
those components open. Speaking schematically, we can say that sustainability is a relationship between generations such that the earlier generations fulfill their individual wants and needs so as not to destroy, or close off, important and valued options for future generations.\textsuperscript{18}

The categories above can include a plurality of values, Norton argued, including consumptive values, transformative and spiritual values and everything in between, allowing for their variation over space and time.\textsuperscript{19} Thus, filling in the content of these categories with specific (and locally dependent) values is an exercise in solidifying the identity of a particular community and supervising their exchange relations.\textsuperscript{20} In short, Norton views sustainability as an active, pragmatic, and comprehensive (poli
tico-socio-economic) philosophy of adaptive management.

As political scientists Michael Kenny and James Meadowcroft have argued, “nearly all definitions [of sustainability] concede that it involves the re-orientation of the ‘meta-objectives’ of a given society—by raising questions about different possible social trajectories through which the society may move, and then by promoting some of these as more ‘sustainable’ than others.”\textsuperscript{21} Norton addressed the importance of these meta-objectives when he argued that “individual preferences and social values—as well as the institutions that shape them—must be considered, and modeled, as endogenous to the social process of environmental management.”\textsuperscript{22} But Norton also argued that commitments to risky partnerships (commitments to negotiate with others outside one’s familiar communities) are “independent of the particular beliefs and values of the participants.”\textsuperscript{23} Drawing on the work of sociologist Jürgen Habermas, Norton further contended that his “discourse ethics promotes multilay-

18. Ibid, 386, italics in original.
20. Given the definition of religion offered by David Chidester, Norton’s notion of sustainability is doing religious work to the extent that it is forging community, shaping exchange relations and focusing desire (see Chidester, Authentic Fakes). It is important to note that we are not claiming, as Kevin Elliot has, that Norton’s definition is in part “metaphysical” (Elliot, “Norton’s Conception of Sustainability”). We believe he has adequately answered Smith’s charge (“Politics and Epistemology”). Religion, as we define it here, need not imply the addition of a metaphysical layer of reality.
ered communication channels that are unshaken by substantive beliefs or personal values.²⁴

Religious or spiritual values, Norton says, may be vetted within particular communities, but cannot be reliably translated into the language of democratic politics. Indeed, for Norton the whole point of a problem-focused approach is to ensure that such subjective metaphysical commitments are not the focus of public policies designed to appease the majority in democratic populations.²⁵

This process-oriented, adaptive model is indeed helpful for viewing policy making as a series of “reflective” and “action” phases, where public discussion about community mores (the reflective phase) lays the groundwork for experimental action (the active phase), which leads to re-visitation of community goals. We agree that these developments in environmental philosophy are important and badly needed, and our work is in significant ways indebted to Norton and other moral pluralists. There are three points, however, where we think religion scholars can productively contribute to the research program imagined by the environmental pragmatists.

First, although values have been given much attention by environmental philosophers, and behaviors have been identified as following from or generating new values, relatively little attention has been paid to the psychological variable that might be termed experience. Peak experiences and other life events that are formative for the moral imagination are often framed in emotive or affective verbiage and related to others people and communities in the form of stories.

Second, such community-bound, highly affective stories are often pointed outward, transmitted to other constituencies, and when they are, they are usually understood as reflecting the core values of those who tell them by those outside their own community group. Although environmental pragmatists are consummate pluralists, at least some believe that the inclusion of such deeply affective and partisan stories within political processes is unproductive. If anything, this is indicative of the lack of attention to religion in environmental pragmatism—an avoidance which is not surprising given classical pragmatism’s ambivalence toward religion.

²⁴. Ibid, 288.

This is related to a third consideration that has to do with the definition of religion employed for analytical purposes. In part, Norton assumed a definition of religion that is “Protestant” in spirit if not in name. That is, Norton endorsed the idea that religion is a private affair confined to the home and the home community. We would argue, however, that religion is also a set of values related to practices that help negotiate relationships with those both inside and outside particular communities. In what follows we will provide greater detail about these areas where we think pragmatism might benefit from greater attention to the religious dimensions of public life.

More Practical Environmental Pragmatism: Experience, Values and Their Transmission

Experience and Values

Although debates over values (Where is the locus of value? Should value be human-centered or not? Monist or pluralist? Preservative or restorative?) occupied most environmental ethics conversations for two decades, other works have asked what role particular behaviors might have on the formulation of values.26 Robyn Eckersley, for example warned in her critiques of pragmatism’s emphasis on methodology that pragmatists too often avoided or sidestepped the host of deep seated issues, values, or beliefs involved in environmental politics or conflict.27 While certain practices may cultivate awareness of new environmental issues or particular ecological relationships, they do so because they engage particular cognitive mechanisms that attach emotion, and thus moral, meaning to particular experiences. This important variable, experience, has been under-scrutinized by many philosophers. This experiential variable should be added to the mix to form an experience/practice/values matrix.

Ben Minteer has also noted the scant attention to religion and religious values among environmental pragmatists.28 Indeed, he implicated

26. Peterson, “Toward a Materialist Environmental Ethic.”
27. Eckersley, “Environmental Pragmatism, Ecocentrism, and Desire,” 53. Norton, for one, suggested that his work on sustainability assumed an already-engaged and proactively-adaptive political process (interview 29 June 2009). To be fair, Norton does not intend to mislead his readers about this, and indeed makes it clear throughout Sustainability that this is one of his guiding assumptions.
himself in this neglect before articulating a means of embracing the role of religious values and experience in policy deliberation. Minteer's response was an exploration of Dewey's work, particularly Dewey's articulation of "natural piety." Simply described, natural piety refers to the formation of affective or spiritual values based on experiences in the natural world. This is a form of piety or faith that is not contingent upon traditional religious belief or practice. In his retrieval of Dewey, Minteer attempted to expand the scope of pragmatism to include a form of environmental ethics contingent upon humans' spiritual experiences with nature. In so doing, he argued that religious experiences in nature have the potential to foster an ethic of respect for nature. These religious experiences do not focus on brokering with divine agents, but instead are "directed at the enabling conditions of lived experience" in nature.29

Reflecting on the contemporary lack of engagement with nature among young people, Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods* (2005) discussed the loss of certain capacities in humans when deprived of experience with or in nature, and the human ecologist Paul Shepard explored similar themes beginning at least as early as the 1980s.30 Shepard's argument was that the "human genome" evolved in the Pleistocene, and that affectively charged experiences in nature help to shape the cognitive machinery that humans now use to perceive the world. These parts of the human physiology and psyche are stunted when there is no engagement with natural stimuli. Moreover, when describing such (perhaps increasingly infrequent) encounters with non-human nature, most people are forced to draw upon religious or spiritual language, metaphor and imagery to describe the deeper affective portions of their experiences.

The bulk of one author's (Snyder's) research supports Eckersly's, Minteer's and Shepard's ideas, elucidating how nature-based experiences —such as hiking, hunting, or fishing—are often perceived as religious experiences facilitated by being-in-nature. Such religious experiences and practices can indeed create gateways to forms of more engaged environmental ethics and concern, including varieties of environmental activism from grassroots politics to ecological restoration.31 Minteer has hinted at the importance that such generic nature reverence plays

29. Ibid, 186.
31. Snyder, "New Streams of Religion." See also Taylor, "Surfing into Spirituality."
in fomenting environmental attitudes and behaviors, but we also want to encourage him (and his philosophical kin) to expand his gaze a bit more to include world religions.

Drawing on Dewey, Minteer specifically resisted describing a spiritually-grounded ethic of the environment with reference to supernatural or transcendent divinities, and suggested that a spiritually-grounded ethic of the environment can emerge solely from experiences in and with the natural world. So, he does not mention the variety of world religions, particularly those which are deity-dependant. In this, he ignored potentially important sources for successful environmental ethics. Research continues to reveal that religion can indeed be a strong and powerful component in the development of engaged and successful environmental ethics. Although worldwide membership in institutional religions is declining, by some accounts the eleven faiths typically referred to as the major global religions comprise approximately two thirds of the world’s population, own around seven percent of the world’s habitable land, and hold approximately six to eight percent of the global investment market. They are, therefore, an important ingredient in the quest for a sustainable global community.

Oftentimes environmental pragmatists would prefer that when religious values are translated into the public sphere they be transmogrified into something more digestible for those who do not concur with their metaphysical presuppositions. They are right to worry about the inclusion of core values and deep beliefs in public deliberation, for religious language is often imprecise, subjective, and abstract. Certainly a diverse populous requires significant practice at translating religious language into effective public policy images, but there should be no doubt that this is already underway. Recent public debates about reproductive choices and the inclusion of evolutionary theory in teaching curricula clearly illustrate that religious messages and public image events carry public weight. This entry of religion into the public sphere is inevitable as long

34. Ironically, by marginalizing strong religious statements and values from public deliberation, some environmental pragmatists have mimicked one of their favorite sparring partners, J. Baird Callicott. In Earth’s Insights (1994), Callicott surveyed both global religions and traditional belief systems in search for common grounds for environmental ethics. In so doing, however, he concluded that religion-based environmental ethics would be much more convincing if they were shorn of their supernatural
as people are religious: It is no more possible or advisable to suggest that believers bracket or ignore the religious traditions that shape them than it would be to ask secular humanists to deny their concern with human well being during public negotiation.

What we are suggesting, then, is that there may be a logical incongruity when pluralists decide that everyone can come to the negotiating table while also dictating what sort of information is relevant for those participants to display and discuss in the public eye. The decision about what data is relevant should also be a matter of public deliberation. Norton and many other pragmatists would likely agree with us in this, so long as it is conceded that not all religious or spiritual discourse is equally relevant or helpful in solving particular environmental problems. Indeed, this is one area where religious studies scholars might help to generate a more productive, “reflective” phase in the formulation of public policy that addresses specific issues. By helping to note when particular belief systems or religious values are maladaptive, religion scholars can move policy formulation process forward in helpful ways.

The Transmission of Values

The other author's (Johnston's) interview work with dozens of high level actors in various sustainability movements indicate that the urban planners Michael Kenny and James Meadowcroft are correct: nearly all definitions of sustainability envision a re-orientation of the “meta-objectives” of a society, whether it is a new ethic, an alternative anthropology, or a more holistic perception.35

35. “New” and “alternative” are terms that advocates use to express what they feel is a new set of guiding principles and values that differ in significant ways from those held by the dominant culture. For examples of this language that range from counter-hegemonic social movements to mainstream development and international political institutions, see Sumner, Sustainability and the Civil Commons, 112; Hawken, Blessed Unrest; Goldsmith et al., Blueprint for Survival, vi; Edwards, The Sustainability Revolution, 2; Gollifer, “Ethical, Moral, and Religious,” 446; International Union for the Conservation of Nature, Caring for the Earth, 9; World Bank, Making the Sustainability Commitment, xxv; WCED, Our Common Future, 1.
Norton’s “community identity values” may be too limited to characterize what people mean when they talk about a new approach to ethics. To assume that the ripples of community values extend only within the bounds of a particular community misses the richly networked relationships among the various sectors of society. In many cases, insiders are pointing these agreed-upon community values outward to critique the larger culture and its social trajectory. Core values of communities are intentionally marketed outside their social boundaries for the purpose of forging partnerships and educating others about community values.

Religious language and stories can be and are used to translate core values and deep beliefs across diverse constituencies with differing value structures. Exposing the values at play in various definitions of sustainability becomes especially important in a pluralistic global context, where those who provide the funding and institutional support for sustainable development programs have in mind a concept of sustainability that is not only foreign but often unwelcome to those who are the “targets” of such development. For example, some conservation and development agencies assume that sustainable development requires engagement with the global market. In contrast, the idea of sustainability may be deployed by indigenous or other marginalized groups as a strategic term to resist incorporation into the global market and its attendant values. The current “moral austerity” of environment-related policy making cannot be overcome without making these value foundations explicit.

Indeed, the anthropologist Robin Wright has noted that in many cases, religiosity may either facilitate or hamper the success of sustainable development projects, depending on the resonance of such religiosity with the values of the granting or funding bodies. In these cases, religion is certainly an important factor in sustainability. Further, if most of the world’s population does not draw significant boundaries between religious and political life, then democratic processes coupled with sustainable development schemes must allow reflection and public debate about the veracity and potential helpfulness of religious values in solving particular problems to produce viable, sustainable public policy.

38. David Chidester notes that a now out of date guidebook for Christian missionaries put the number of “animistic” peoples on the planet, those who do not resonate with traditional Western categories and concepts, at roughly 40% (Chidester, "Animism," 78,
Indeed, several individuals from our case studies engaged in deliberation precisely because of their religious beliefs and values, not in spite of them.

In Norton’s deliberative politics such commitments to risky partnerships (commitments to negotiate with others outside of one’s own community) have nothing to do with “the particular beliefs and values of the participants.” We believe Norton may have utilized an outdated and essentially private definition of religion to state his case. In addition, religious beliefs and practices are often important ingredients in political deliberation, and we hope to point to ways that social scientists and humanities scholars can help produce more effective policy solutions by vetting specific beliefs and practices in the public sphere and assessing their ability to address real world problems. During this reflective phase, while the “truth” of particular religious traditions is not at stake, religious practices and beliefs can and should be assessed according to their ability to effectively characterize and propose solutions to specific human (and particularly ecological) problems.

Rethinking Religion for a Constructive and Adaptive Social Science Research Program

In A Common Faith (1960), Dewey’s approach to religion and religious experience (and he differentiates between them) suggested that religion and religious experience are possible without belief in or dependence upon the supernatural. Norton and Light are just two contemporary philosophers who likewise pursue a post-metaphysical approach to environmental ethics. Norton traced his post-metaphysical model to Jürgen Habermas, while Light argued that environmental pragmatism requires “making the kind of arguments that resonate with the moral intuitions that most people carry around with them on an everyday basis.”

Pragmatists would do well, however, to take note of current scholarship in religious studies. While those outside the field tend to view

study referenced from 1991). The anthropologist Darrell Posey suggests that, excluding urban populations, indigenous peoples could amount to 85% of the world’s population (Indigenous Knowledge and Ethics). One publication from the IUCN, UNEP, and WWF put the number of indigenous peoples at about 200 million, or approximately 4% of the (then) global population (Caring for the Earth, 61).


religion as dependent upon belief in gods or deities, many in religious studies understand belief, faith, and the supernatural to be only a few aspects of religion. Belief in supernatural beings has proven ineffective as a litmus test for religiosity in light of strong genealogical critiques of religion as a category. While the term religion is now used across the globe, it does not always or even usually refer to supernatural agents and miracle occurrences that intervene in the natural order. Instead, religion should be imagined as strategically, intellectually, and socially useful in several contexts, for both Westerners and non-Westerners who have adapted the term as a means of explaining their life-ways to others. In fact, some religious studies scholars have adopted a methodology focused less on what people believe and more on what people do with their religious categories. Russell McCutcheon's response to an audience question at a conference is illustrative: following his presentation he was asked whether he meant that religion was "also social, biological, political, economic, and so on, or whether [McCutcheon] was saying that religion was only social, biological, political, economic, and so on." McCutcheon's answer: "Only. Next question?"

McCutcheon may have been unduly provocative in his response, but his point is significant: for scholars of religion, analysis should focus not on supposed internal subjective states and beliefs but on the effects that these beliefs, values and practices have (through their believers) in the real world. According to this understanding, scholars of religion should attend to subjective states to the extent that they are affirmed by persons or communities rather than searching for an essentially religious facet of experience or thought abstracted from people in particular places.

41. Chidester, Authentic Fakes; Hall, Lived Religion; Orsi, "Everyday Miracles."
42. Asad, Genealogies of Religion; Masuzawa, The Invention of the World Religions; Dubuison, The Western Construction of Religion; McCutcheon, Manufacturing Religion. See also Evan Berry's chapter in this volume.
43. McCutcheon, Critics Not Caretakers, x.
44. Cases where a priori metaphysical assumptions guide research might include earlier scholars such as Rudolph Otto, who suggested that religious experience was grounded in the perception of a mysterium tremendum, or Mircea Eliade, who argued that religion was a cultural phenomenon that reflected encounters with something objectively real in nature called the sacred. More recent examples might include scholars who claim that followers of this or that religion (say, Islam) would naturally behave in a particular fashion if they were authentic believers (say, authentic Muslims). McCutcheon's Religion and the Domestication of Dissent has provided an extended critique of overbroad and essentialist understandings of Islam following the attacks on the New York City World Trade Centers on September 11, 2001. Such essentialist claims
McCUTCHEON'S RESPONSE AND RESEARCH AGENDA CAN BE RELATED TO A GROUP OF SCHOLARS WHO ARGUE THAT THE STUDY OF RELIGION SHOULD BE CONCEIVED AS A "MATERIALIST PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGION." Religion scholars David Hall, Robert Orsi, Thomas Tweed and others have advanced a methodology that allows for the investigation of affective states through empathetic observation or participation, but contextualizes these observations by attending to socio-political circumstances.

But such religious production is not found only within the boundaries of the traditional "world" or "global" religions. For religion scholar Rebecca Gould's subjects, experiences in nature were sources of "meaning and authority" for both individuals and communities. Her study of homesteading in the United States is similar in approach to the one Minteer articulated through Dewey's idea of "natural piety," which highlights a "sense of awe and meaningful appreciation of the natural world" through direct "religious" engagement with it. While she might not consider herself a pragmatist, we believe that Gould's work is something that environmental pragmatists ought to consider as instructive. In such analyses a religious relationship with nature takes place beyond the walls of a mosque, synagogue, or church in the experiential spaces of nature.

Building a bounded definition of religion is less important than learning what it means for particular people in their places. Ludwig Wittgenstein (for one) has questioned whether providing a solid definition of any term is necessary for understanding:

We are able to use the word "plant" in a way that gives rise to no misunderstanding, yet countless borderline cases can be constructed in which no one has yet decided whether something still falls under the concept "plant." Does this mean that the meaning of the word "plant" in all other cases is infected by uncertainty, so that it might be said we use the word without understanding it? Would a definition which bounded this concept on several sides make the meaning of the word clearer to us in all sentences?

May tell more about those who imagine and endorse them than they do about those who are studied by looking through such lenses.

46. Tweed has argued that this methodology is indebted to the work of philosophical pragmatism, notably that of Hilary Putnam (Crossing and Dwelling).
49. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Grammar, 73.
Wittgenstein's answer, and ours, is "no." Many have used the term religion to refer to institutional manifestations of religion (those confined by buildings and traditions), as well as more commonplace and everyday experiences of affectively-grounded communion with others (even, as religion scholar David Chidester has, referring to baseball or live music performance). In our understanding of religion, all of these uses of the term "count." As Saler put it, "if we deem admission to a group (as comprehended by the category religion) to be a matter of 'more or less' rather than a matter of 'yes or no,' then an argument can be made for admitting 'secular religions' and 'quasi-religions' as peripheral members." Conceptualizing religion in this way, as a category that refers to overlapping attributes or family resemblances (first proposed by Wittgenstein), "facilitates going beyond religion [as synonymous with institutional practice and creed] and attending to 'the religious dimension' of much of human life." If all of these varied sets of characteristics "count," from substantive definitions to functional ones, from subjectively-derived definitions to those that suggest religion is a product of society, it allows analysis of a wider range of social phenomena with a

50. Chidester, Authentic Fakes.

51. Saler, "Toward a Realistic," 230. Using the same theories that Saler utilized more than a decade earlier, anthropologist Jonathan Benthall argued that "Linguists have developed the idea of 'prototype semantics,' whereby the applicability of a word to a thing is not a matter of 'yes or no,' but rather of 'more or less.'" Further, he said that "these criteria may be graded" (Benthall, Returning to Religion, 21). If some aspects of human lives contain more religion-reshsembling features than others, we may find that "some religions, in a manner of speaking, are 'more religious' than others" (Saler, Conceptualizing Religion, xiv), though this "more" does not refer to a greater authenticity, but rather a closer resemblance to one or more prototypes of that category.

52. Saler, Conceptualizing Religion, 214; see also Saler, "Toward a Realistic," 230. Saler and Benthall, as well as religion scholars Manuel Vasquez and Bron Taylor, have utilized Wittgenstein's family resemblances model to analyze religion (Saler, "Toward a Realistic," 197; Benthall, Returning to Religion, 46–80; Vasquez, "Studying Religion in Motion"; Taylor, "Exploring Religion, Nature, and Culture," 15–17; Taylor, Dark Green Religion, 4–5). In Conceptualizing Religion Saler compares the virtues and pitfalls of both family resemblances (derived from linguistic philosophy), and polythetic classification (derived from biology), arguing that both tools would likely have what he calls a "practical convergence," producing similar results when applied to a term such as religion (Saler, Conceptualizing Religion, 170). In the end, however, the family resemblance model, coupled with "prototype theory" is Saler's preference. For criticisms of the family resemblance approach, see Perspectives on Method and Theory in the Study of Religion: Adjunct Proceedings of the XVIIIth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (Geertz and McCutcheon, Perspectives on Method and Theory, 287–337).
religious studies lens than would otherwise be the case. It is possible, for example, to attend to the "religious dimension" of social movements while withholding judgment about where they fall on the "more to less religious" continuum. Envisioning religion as a pool of loosely related elements allows analysis of how the religious dimensions of social movements help to forge community, facilitate exchange, and focus desire.\(^5\) Religion scholars should attend to this religious dimension wherever they find it, even (and perhaps especially) if it occurs outside the boundaries of what is considered typically religious. Given this expanded definition of religion, it is also our hope that scholars from other disciplines will be less shy about attempting to understand the complex ways in which religion also contributes to better understandings of their own fields of study.

If religion is intimately involved in creating community cohesion (and simultaneously bounding that community by excluding others), facilitating exchange relations, and focusing desire, the most productive analytical approach is to trace the material manifestations and public deployments of such inferences.\(^4\) As the anthropologist Scott Atran and his co-authors put it,

People's mental representations interact with other people's mental representations to the extent that those representations can be *physically transmitted in a public medium* . . . These public representations, in turn, are sequenced and channeled by ecological features of the external environment (including the social environment) that constrain psychophysical interactions between individuals.\(^5\)

Cultural "things" like religion, then, are "distributions of [mental] representations in a human population, *ecological patterns of psychological things.*"\(^6\) Understanding particular cultures, or in this case social movements, depends upon noting which representations appear to be the most

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53. Chidester argued that something is doing religious work when it is "engaged in negotiating what it means to be human" (*Authentic Fakes*, 18), and shaping the public sphere by "forming community, focusing desire, and facilitating exchange" (5).

54. Anna Peterson ("Toward a Materialist") has argued for the merits of a materialist environmental ethic.


t is possible, movements more to less closely related social movements and public interest, interaction between environmental pragmatists and religion and nature scholars to generate a genuinely constructive, iterative and adaptive process of ecosystem management. Religion scholars can help environmental pragmatists to envision a broader and more productive reflective phase of the policy deliberation process. But it requires greater nuance in the use of terms typically left confined within particular disciplinary silos, and a greater willingness to practice vetting highly affective narratives in the public sphere. If ethics are to evolve from lived experience, as pragmatists would have it, and restoration, conservation and conflict resolution are to become effective spaces for public deliberations on societal values, then greater attention to experiential sources of core values and deep beliefs is required. If we accept Light's challenge and focus on the "empirical question of what morally motivates humans to change their attitudes, behaviors, and policy preferences toward those more supportive of long-term environmental sustainability," then it may be necessary to acknowledge that in many cases moral motivation derives from religious commitments (in the broad sense that religion has been defined here).  

This is, in spirit at least, a pragmatist approach.

Bibliography

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57. Ibid, 54.
58. Light, "Restoring Ecological Citizenship," 446.


