
Negotiating Spirituality in Sustainable Collectives: A Case-Study of Two Multi-Spiritual European Ecovillages

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Abstract

Spirituality is increasingly seen as bearing potential to support transitions toward more sustainable behavior. However, knowledge about how sustainable collectives including members who identify as spiritual and nonspiritual negotiate this diversity to ensure their sustainability goals is limited. Applying a lived religion approach, this article addresses this gap based on an instrumental qualitative case study of two European ecovillages which include members holding diverse spiritualities and members who do not identify as spiritual. The analysis of fieldwork data regarding how spirituality becomes manifest in community narratives, rituals, pro-environmental behaviors, and materiality shows that spirituality is not important for the ecovillages as collective actors for sustainability—but spirituality matters to be a sustainable collective. Core to negotiating diversity related to spirituality are inclusively designed shared practices that rely on the communities' narratives and foci. Based on these findings, this study argues for a more fine-grained analysis of the role of spirituality for collective action for sustainability in contexts of deep diversity related to spirituality.

Keywords

Sustainability, spirituality, diversity, ecovillages, grassroots innovations, lived religion

Introduction

Scholars and policymakers increasingly acknowledge that solutions to current socio-ecological challenges not only require technological approaches and more efficiency, but also social and cultural transformation (Abson et al. 2017; Ives et al. 2020; Pistors et al. 2020; Wamsler et

al. 2021; Woiwode et al. 2021).¹ Some scholars even argue that neglecting the cultural and spiritual dimensions of sustainability is one of the root causes preventing successful systemic change leading to more sustainable societies (Abson et al. 2017; Ives et al. 2020; Wamsler et al. 2021).

As part of people's inner worlds, spirituality shapes both individual and collective values and worldviews (Woiwode et al. 2021; Ives and Kidwell 2019). As such, spirituality has the potential to reframe the perceived role of human beings in the world and, consequently, their behavior (Kamitsis and Francis 2013; Chaves et al. 2017; Gonçalves Brito 2023). For instance, studies found that individuals' spirituality can be a driver for change toward more environmentally, compassionate, and socially just behavior (Pisters et al. 2020). At the same time, others are more skeptical of the role of spirituality to change environmental behavior (Taylor et al. 2016), arguing that people become more spiritual because they are already concerned about the environment—not the other way around. These insights signal a need for better understanding the role of spirituality in social change toward sustainability.

Research on civil society-based groups and movements has shown that spirituality can play an important role to such sustainable collectives. Scholarship on sustainability transitions recognizes the role of these groups to inspire and potentially bring about change toward more sustainable lifestyles and social organizations (Monticelli 2021; Seyfang and Smith 2007; Henfrey et al. 2022; Köhler et al. 2019). Studies located at the nexus of sustainability related collectives and spirituality tend to focus on groups identifying with a single organized religion, such as Islam (Nilan 2021; Hancock 2020; Mohamad et al. 2012), Christianity (Ledderucci 2021), Buddhism and Hinduism (Mohamad et al. 2012; Lestar 2018). Other studies take the level of the individual into focus (Gonçalves Brito 2023; Pisters et al. 2020; Lestar and Böhm 2020; Boudinot and LeVasseur 2016). However, knowledge about how grassroots groups that include members who are not spiritual as well as members holding different spiritualities negotiate this diversity to

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enable collective action for sustainability is limited. To remedy this gap, this study focuses on multi-spiritual ecovillages.

Most basically, ecovillages are communities that strive to live and operate more sustainably. However, ecovillage characteristics and concerns vary widely, depending on the community members' values, wishes, and visions, as well as cultural, ecological and geopolitical contexts, legal regulations, skills, and material resources (Kozioł 2020; Nelson 2018). Nevertheless, most ecovillages are characterized as village-scale attempts and adopt a holistic approach to sustainability to strive for solutions to global socio-ecological challenges (Chitewere and Taylor 2010; Litfin 2009; Waerther 2014; Wagner 2013). They do so by experimenting with and developing alternative, and more sustainable, ways of doing, thinking and organising across the environmental, social, economic, and cultural dimensions of sustainability (Kunze and Avelino 2015; Litfin 2014). Examples include ecological construction methods, permaculture design, the use of solar and wind technologies, water retention and grey water treatment systems, participative governance models, conflict resolution, methods to connect to each other and nonhuman environments, and sharing economies. In this sense, ecovillages serve as living laboratories that can model and inspire alternative approaches to more sustainable lifestyles and societies (Avelino and Kunze 2009; Waerther 2014; Roysen et al. 2024). While diverse in characteristics, ecovillages also often incorporate a common worldview based on the interconnectedness of humanity and nonhuman environments (Litfin 2014; Lestar and Böhm 2020; Farkas 2018). As collectives, ecovillages may include individuals who identify with nonspiritual forms of this worldview and members who hold spiritual forms of it (Papenfuss and Merritt 2019; Temesgen 2020; Pinto 2024; Pinto and Vilaça 2023).

Given this background, the aim of this article is to address the following research question: how do ecovillages negotiate among members holding diverse (non)spiritualities to achieve collective goals? Therefore, I am not interested in the (spiritual) belief systems and practices of individual ecovillage members but instead analyse how spirituality appears on the collective level. The focus lies on ecovillagers' collective actions and self-reported values. In this study, the collective level is understood as the 'public' community sphere within an ecovillage contrasting the 'private' individual sphere. Owing to my interest in the multiple ways that spiritualities may appear on the collective level, I adopt the phenomenological framework of 'lived religion' (Ammerman 2021; McGuire 2016). The analysis, based on fieldwork in two multi-spiritual European ecovillages, shows that spirituality is not a necessity *for* collective action for sustainability, but it is important to