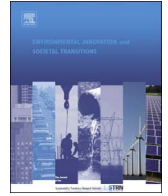




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Original Research Paper

Religious agency in sustainability transitions: Between experimentation, upscaling, and regime support

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ABSTRACT

Research in the field of sustainability transitions (STs) has significantly extended our knowledge of variables influencing these processes. However, the field so far has barely considered religion. The burgeoning debate on religion and ecology (RED), in contrast, highlights the potentials for religion to address environmental challenges. This article brings both academic debates together, systematizing and describing three types of religious agency from a transitions perspective: experimentation, upscaling, and regime support. These become manifest in ST processes at two levels: (a) internal transitions within religious organizations and (b) broader societal STs. Discussing transition activities of religious actors at these two levels, the article highlights the religious agency in STs, thereby contrasting existing transitions research where religion is often regarded as a passive landscape variable.

1. Introduction

Research in the rapidly growing field of sustainability transitions (STs) has significantly extended our knowledge of variables influencing STs (Markard et al., 2012; van den Bergh et al., 2011). However, this field barely considers religion. The few contributions that do address religion, conceive it mostly as a background (landscape) variable (Avelino and Wittmayer, 2016; Kates and Parris, 2003; Murphy and Smith, 2013; Ouedraogo, 2006; Sengers et al., 2016; Wittmayer et al., 2016). In taking this approach, they abstain from specifying in what way religion could play more active roles in STs.

Despite this, several points suggest a potential relevance of religion for ST processes: For centuries, religion has played an important role in social transformation processes, hindering or spurring these changes: e.g. the U.S. Civil-Rights-Movement, the Iranian Revolution, the Anti-Communist Uprising in Poland, the Nicaraguan Revolution (Gardner, 2003; Herbert, 2002; Tucker, 2006). Even under the supposed secularization process, religion continues to inform the lives of vast population segments. In many socio-geographic spaces religious organizations and actors are held in high esteem. Here, they may constitute major actors in the public sphere and frequently assume the role of moral watchdogs (Casanova, 1994, 2008; Davie, 2010; Habermas, 2006). Against the backdrop of climate change, many religious groups have adopted proactive positions in the public sphere while others intensified their previous public engagement (Gardner, 2002, 2003; Lorentzen and Leavitt-Alcantara, 2006; Wardekker et al., 2009). This is, for instance, prominently illustrated by Pope Francis' encyclical "*Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*". On the other hand, religious worldviews and values may also promote climate change skepticism and inactivity, thereby blocking transitions: for instance, when religious actors disseminate worldviews that regard climate change as part of the welcomed apocalypse, their religious constituents are more likely to accept climate change than to counteract it (Artur and Hilhorst, 2012; Haluza-DeLay, 2014; Roscoe,

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2016).

The religion and ecology debate (RED), a burgeoning research strand related to religious studies and theology, highlights the potentials of religion in environmental transitions (cf. Clugston and Holt, 2012; Gottlieb, 2008; Rasmussen, 2011; Tucker, 2008). Contributions to RED often voice strong claims regarding the role of religion, supposing that it can facilitate STs in modern societies like no other social sphere. Yet, this debate lacks (a) comprehensive empirical research that underpins its claims and (b) theoretical conceptualizations of the different roles that religion can assume in STs. Moreover, RED has, so far, barely connected to transitions research.

This article endeavors to bring both debates—the academic field of STs and RED—closer to each other. Drawing upon RED and combining it with insights from transitions research, sociology, and environmental psychology, this article presents a theoretical framework for considering religion that systematizes potential roles of religion in STs. Placing an emphasis on religious actors (e.g. churches, pastors), the article describes their experimentation, upscaling, and regime supporting activities in transition processes. Based upon empirical insights from research on religion and ecology to illustrate these activities, the article shows that religion forms more than just a landscape variable and assumes active roles in STs. The theoretical systematization allows for defining potential areas of research and identifying ways in which transitions research can relate to the study of religion.

While RED has tackled various religious traditions, the majority of empirical studies have focused on Christianity. Against the backdrop of a research focus on Christianity and given the predominance of Christian actors—in particular the Catholic Church and protestant churches—in Western countries, the present article also places an emphasis on these actors.

The article is structured as follows: the first section summarizes how transitions research and RED portray religion in STs. The following section briefly introduces the reader to the theoretical framework which, based on transitions research, conceptualizes actors and distinguishes between three essential packages of activities of actors in STs: experimentation, upscaling, and regime support. In the fourth section, the article defines religious actors and applies the aforementioned systematization to their activities in STs. This section differentiates between internal STs within religious organizations and the participation of religious actors in broader societal transitions. It illustrates the transition activities of religious actors at these two levels based on insights from research on religion and ecology. The fifth section discusses the results from the previous section and identifies potential areas of further empirical research on religion in STs. The conclusion summarizes the main insights of the article and discusses the potential for approaches within transitions research that take religion into account more thoroughly.

2. Perspectives on religion in sustainability transitions (STs)

Sustainability transitions research defines Sustainability Transitions (STs) as “long-term, multi-dimensional, and fundamental transformation processes through which established socio-technical systems shift to more sustainable modes of production and consumption” (Markard et al., 2012: 956). Research in this growing academic field has significantly extended our knowledge of these processes. Prevalent theoretical frameworks such as Technological-Innovation-Systems (Bergek et al., 2008; Hekkert et al., 2007; Markard and Truffer, 2008b), and the multi-level perspective (Geels 2002, 2004, 2011; Verbong and Geels, 2007; Verbong and Geels 2010) have developed sophisticated tools to explore how and under what circumstances new sustainable technologies evolve and expand, significantly widening our understanding of these processes.

In particular, the multi-level perspective has strongly shaped the emerging academic field. Distinguishing between the three levels—landscape, regime and niche—it considers the niche level as the crucial level for initiating radical change and experimenting with alternatives to dominant regimes while changes on the landscape level may open windows of opportunity for upscaling niche experiments and effectively changing the regime (Geels 2002). Within this framework, religion could be considered at these different levels, as, for instance, provoking niche experimentation, preparing broader value changes that pressurize transformations in regimes, or supporting regime structures.

As religion (a) shapes the lifestyles of billions of individuals, (b) arguably assumes a growing presence in the public sphere of modern societies (Casanova, 1994; Davie, 2010; Habermas, 2008), and (c) is increasingly taking a pro-active stance on climate change, it may also become manifest in STs. However, the frequent technological focus of transitions research appears to draw the attention away from “softer,” cultural factors, such as religion (cf. Shove and Walker, 2007). As such, STs research has highlighted the importance of different social spheres and actors—such as politicians, businesses, city administrators, citizen initiatives, researchers, and intermediaries (cf. Coenen et al., 2012; Geels et al., 2008; Hodson and Marvin 2010; Mattes et al., 2015; Späth and Rohrer, 2013)—but has barely taken religion into account. Religion has remained somehow invisible in research on STs. Apart from prevalent research foci that exclude religion from the array of relevant factors, the potential for religion to become visible in STs depends on the conceptual framing of the given transition process. Predominant narratives often highlight the importance of technological changes or economic incentives (e.g. “green economy”, cf. Luederitz et al., 2016). When regarding STs mostly as a technological or economic undertaking, actors involved in STs are unlikely to perceive religion as relevant for the transformation process and even feel the need to disguise the relevancy of religion (Koehrsen, 2017). Thereby, predominant transition narratives contribute to the invisibility of religion in these transformation processes. The precarious position of “religion” in Western discourses on sustainability is further underlined by the case that framing climate change as a religion has become as a viable counter-strategy of skeptics to deny climate change and denigrate environmental engagement (Nerlich, 2010; Woods et al., 2010).

Accordingly, in the field of sustainability transitions research, there are only rare references to religion. Contributions that mention religion, usually do so in the form of isolated references, barely addressing religion in a direct manner (cf. Avelino and Wittmayer, 2016; Kates and Parris, 2003; Murphy and Smith, 2013; Ouedraogo, 2006; Sengers et al., 2016; Wittmayer et al., 2016). Often, religion appears as a context or background variable: existing religious beliefs and values are considered as factors that,

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