El-Jurdi, Hounaida and Batat, Wided and Jafari, Aliakbar (2017)
Harnessing the power of religion : broadening sustainability research
and practice in the advancement of ecology. Journal of Macromarketing,
37 (1). 7–24. ISSN 0276-1467,
http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0276146716672285

This version is available at https://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/57686/

Strathprints is designed to allow users to access the research output of the University of Strathclyde. Unless otherwise explicitly stated on the manuscript, Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Please check the manuscript for details of any other licences that may have been applied. You may not engage in further distribution of the material for any profitmaking activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute both the url (https://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/) and the content of this paper for research or private study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge.

Any correspondence concerning this service should be sent to the Strathprints administrator: strathprints@strath.ac.uk

The Strathprints institutional repository (https://strathprints.strath.ac.uk) is a digital archive of University of Strathclyde research outputs. It has been developed to disseminate open access research outputs, expose data about those outputs, and enable the management and persistent access to Strathclyde's intellectual output.
Harnessing the Power of Religion: Broadening Sustainability Research and Practice in the Advancement of Ecology

Hounaida El-Jurdi¹, Wided Batat² & Aliakbar Jafari³
¹American University of Beirut
²University of Lyon 2
³University of Strathclyde Department of Marketing

Abstract

Sustainability research in the macromarketing literature has been largely limited to exploring sociocultural values and norms, business practices, public policies, and economic conditions. Although the concept of ‘values’ constantly recurs in the literature, religious perspectives have received little attention. By presenting an alternative interpretation of what have traditionally been construed as anthropocentric religions, this study highlights the underutilized potential of religions as effective vehicles for initiating cultural transformation towards sustainability. The article calls for contextualized approaches to ecological sustainability that take into account the values and worldviews of target communities, which are often shaped by religious systems. The article concludes that including religions in the sustainability discourse can benefit macromarketing theory and practice in a variety of ways.

Key words: religion, sustainability, values, ecology, worldviews
Introduction

Does religion have a role to play in the sustainability discourse? A review of the extant literatures on religion and ecology indicates an affirmative answer. Yet, there is a wide chasm between two opposing views: on the one hand, religion is held accountable for fuelling unsustainable modes of production and consumption (e.g., Feuerbach 1957; Nash 1991; White Jr. 1967); and on the other hand, religion is defended for combating such undesirable practices (e.g., Bouma-Prediger 2009; Gardner 2006; Johnston 2014; Motahari 1985, 1990; Nasr 1997; Tucker 2008; Tucker and Grim 2001; Wallis 2010). A root cause of conflict between these two camps is the notion of anthropocentrism. The former associates human beings’ unsustainable life practices and their negative consequences (e.g., ecological degradation and the depletion of natural resources) with theological teachings (e.g., The Chain of Being) that have allegedly legitimized man’s exploitation of nature. Contrary to this view, advocates of religion argue that unsustainable behaviors are only the immediate outcome of a narrow interpretation of the divine teachings that regard mankind as the custodian of nature.

Scholarship on the positive and multiple relationships between religious principles and environmental ethics is abundant within the social sciences (for a review, see Tucker and Grim 2001). This extensive scholarship testifies to the fact that religions have an established trajectory of propagating pro-environmental behaviors anchored in the fundamental ‘values of being and living’ (Motahari 1985, 1990). Religions’ grassroots value-based approach to sustainability provides an enduring and holistic ethics framework within which socioeconomic growth strategies can be devised and implemented in such ways that their subsequent social, economic, and ecological harms can be minimized if not eliminated (Nasr 1997; Wallis 2010). Juxtaposed with the general sustainability discourse, which commonly encompasses the 3E’s (economy,
environment/ecology, and equity), the present article specifically focuses on the ecological/environmental aspects of sustainability in relation to religions.

Ecological/environmental sustainability refers to the preservation of three functional categories that represent the direct or partial use of natural resources essential for human survival: 1) resource provision, 2) absorption of wastes generated by human activities, and 3) provision of environmental services related or unrelated to human activity (Visconti, Minowa and Maclaran 2014).

A cross-disciplinary theoretical analysis of the extant literatures on religious studies, social sciences, ecology, environmental studies, ecofeminism studies, marketing, and macromarketing reveals four based on four religious perspectives on to sustainability: 1) religions’ harmful contribution to ecological sustainability, 2) religions’ beneficial contribution to ecological sustainability, 3) secular/non-religious approach to ecological sustainability, and 4) other mixed approaches to ecological sustainability drawn from religious studies, social sciences, ecology, environmental studies, ecofeminism studies, marketing, and macromarketing is conducted to identify the intersection between religion, ecological sustainability, and macromarketing (see Table 1).

Table 1 shows that the macromarketing literature has traditionally focused on a secular/non-religious approach to ecological sustainability and the works we identified mostly focus on the intersection between ecological sustainability and macromarketing implications and overlook religious perspectives, except the foundational work of Hunt and Vitell (2006) which incorporates the intersection between religion, ecological sustainability, and macromarketing in general and without specifically exploring the potential role religion can play in promoting
ecological sustainability. Yet, reviewing the macromarketing literature shows that multiple papers recently published in Journal of Macromarketing have focused on religion and macromarketing, but not in relation to ecological sustainability. For example, Drenten and Mcmanus, (2015) provided a review of articles in macromarketing that have dealt with religion and religious issues; Kale (2004) provided a discussion of issues of spirituality and religion in the globalized context; Yardakul and Atik (2015) explored the role of religion in coping with poverty; Sandıkcı et al. (2015) examined the impact of globalization, religion, and economic growth on individual well-being; and Kamarulzaman et al. (2015) studied the role of religion in searching Halal food in digital media. While religion is not a new research topic in the macromarketing literature, Drenten and McManus (2015) argue that there is not much research that combines religion and ecological sustainability or environmental issues, except for the work of 1) Friedman and Hershey (2001) who explored the impact of Jewish values on marketing and business practices, 2) Leary, Minton, and Mittelstaedt (2016), who explored the macro-level influences of religion on the marketplace by showing how religion influences beliefs of dominion and stewardship, and 3) Minton et al. (2015), who proposed a cross-cultural comparison of religious motivations for sustainable behaviors.

Our review of the extant literature at the intersection of marketing, religion and ecological sustainability (see table 1) indicates that macromarketing lags behind other disciplines (e.g., ecology and environmental studies) in which the positive relationship between religions and ecological/environmental sustainability is well trodden (see, for example, Batchelor 1993; Chuvieco 2012; Dellios 2001; Dien 1997; Foltz, Denny, and Baharuddin 2003; Hessel and Ruether 2000; Mohamad et al. 2012; Tucker and Williams 1997). This oversight may be associated with: 1) macromarketing’s overreliance on secular ideologies at the expense of
religions’ as multifaceted ‘resources’ (Jafari 2012; Kadirov 2014), and 2) researchers’ narrow focus on the impact of religiosity on consumers’ ethical behaviors. For example, Hunt and Vitell (2006, 1986) propose a general theory of marketing ethics incorporating religion as a macro and micro level force that influences consumer behavior. Wenell (2009) explored how positive moral impulses during Christmas consumptive practices could be sustained in everyday life. While ethics constitutes an important link between religions and markets, it does not wholly explain the impact of religion on markets (Mittelstaedt, 2002). Addressing such oversights, the present article aims to enhance our understanding of: (1) how religions can enrich the ecological/environmental sustainability discourse at a macro level; (2) what can be learned from faith-based sustainability initiatives, and (3) how such learning can effectively inform policy and help efficiently improve our existing sustainability practices which may not necessarily be associated with religions.

The contributions of the article are twofold. Firstly, scholars (e.g., Helleiner 2000; Johnston 2008; Varey 2010, 2011) have begun to ponder if sustainability movements can be truly sustainable. For example, Catlin and Wang (2013) showed that recycling can lead to over-consumption. Such skepticism is basically concerned with the dominant value systems in which sustainability movements are nurtured. Here, the essence of argument is that so long as sustainability operates within the dominant framework of the neoliberal political and economic ideology, it is doomed to subordinate the mainstream unsustainable modes of living (Varey 2011). For example, since green consumerism is generally predicated on and enacted by neoliberalism’s ‘citizen-consumer’ motto, it is less likely to create grassroots behavioral change as greening may paradoxically lead to the overproduction and overconsumption of green products (Catlin and Wang 2013; Johnston 2008; Varey 2010). Hence, while only the form of
unsustainability changes, its nature remains intact (Cunningham 2002). Others (e.g., Assadourian 2010; Scott, Martin and Schouten 2014) warn that given the rapid global expansion of consumerism and its subsequent ecological harms, sustainability is far from gaining widespread global recognition as a megatrend. This article subscribes to these perspectives, yet, it stresses that parallel to the ongoing theorizations, the urgency of tackling unsustainability necessitates immediate action, be it ‘radical’ (seeking grassroots change) or ‘reformist’ (corrective) (Mittelstaedt et al. 2014). This requires that we broaden our understanding of multiple actors whose varying, and sometimes conflictual, practices and value systems influence (un)sustainability. Among many of such actors and practices, religious value-based initiatives offer a fertile ground on which to further investigate and operationalize sustainability.

The second contribution arises from the diversity of views religions can offer. Nowadays, there is an increasing recognition for the importance of contextualized approaches to sustainability (DesJardins 2007; Eaton and Lorentzen 2003; Mascarenhas et al. 2010; Polonsky, Kilbourne and Vocino 2014; Reed, Fraser and Dougill 2006). This stream of research argues that sustainability’s modern definitions, conceptual frameworks and solutions have emerged and been implemented in the context of western industrialized societies. Hence, sustainability discourses are largely entrenched in western institutions (i.e., sociocultural values and norms, business practices, policies and politics, and economic conditions), which implies that recommendations resulting from west-centric projects may not be readily generalized to other societies that have different sets of development trajectories and socioeconomic, political and cultural characteristics, and institutions (Gifford 2011; Soron 2010). Mittelstaedt (2002) contends that public policy in emerging markets is often shaped by religious political and social authority; hence, our understanding of markets is greatly enhanced by understanding the role that religion
plays in such economies. Therefore, the inclusion of non-western theories and practices can
enrich our understanding of the theoretical and practical underpinnings of sustainability (see also
Jafari et al. 2012). By the same token, given their diversities and localities, religions can help
accommodate a more encompassing approach to sustainability.

In order to pre-empt misunderstandings, and in agreement with Tucker and Grim (2001),
two key points should be clarified: firstly, while “religions are necessary partners in the current
ecological movement”, their contribution is insufficient without the essential contributions of
science, social sciences and policy to the various challenges posed by contemporary ecological
problems (Tucker and Grim p. 3). Secondly, “no single religion is privileged over the
contributions of the world’s religions to the flourishing of life for future generations” (Tucker
and Grim 2001, p. 3).

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. First, with a focus on ecological
concerns, a concise review of the key debates on sustainability is presented. This section
highlights two points: (1) at a macro level and as resources (Jafari 2012; Kadirov 2014) and
values systems (Nasr 1997; Wallis 2010), religions are largely understudied in the extant
macromarketing literature on sustainability; and (2) where included, they are portrayed as a
problem rather than a solution (see for example Leary, Minton and Mittlestaedt 2016). Then,
there is an overview of the debate on whether or not religions advocate anthropocentrism. This is
followed by a brief account of religious perspectives on sustainability through the lens of
Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This choice is not meant to exclude other faiths and
spiritualities (e.g. Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Sikhism, aboriginal and so forth); these
Abrahamic religions are discussed because anthropocentrism is oftentimes blamed on them.

Next, after explaining the rise of interest in engaging religions in debates on ecological
conservation, there is a discussion on the way religions can broaden the existing dominant conceptualizations of sustainability at a macro level and help resolve ecological problems where other (secular) institutions are not (sufficiently) operant. The article concludes with a discussion on how and why macromarketing research into sustainability can benefit from incorporating faith-based practices in the development of theory, policy, and practice. Areas for future research are also highlighted.

**Sustainability and the Dominant Social Paradigm**

Despite the rise of environmentalism and increased public awareness of the environmental impact of modern modes of living, environmentalism is seriously challenged by the emergence of more individualized and globalized societies, the escalating global population, and the rise of consumerism (Assadourian 2010; Connolly and Prothero 2008; Merchant 2005; Scott, Martin, and Schouten 2014). Merchant (2005) issued a warning to all citizens that human beings are in an endangered situation. For Merchant, “the uncontrolled multinational corporations are leading an undesirable globalization that is inhumane, environmentally degrading, farmer killing, and undemocratic.” (p. 224). Peattie and Peattie (2009) contend that barriers to sustainability do not lie in the lack of public knowledge of the dangers of unsustainable behaviors; rather, the challenge is how to bridge the gap between knowledge and behavior. The implementation of collective measures at the government level plays a significant role in adopting more sustainable behaviors (Purushottam 2014). In this regard, Fischer et al. (2012) highlight five priority areas that are necessary to evoking more sustainable behavioral change: (1) strengthening institutions of civil society and improving citizen engagement; (2) controlling growth level in consumption as well as population growth; (3) addressing social justice issues; (4) reforming formal institutions; and (5) reflecting on value and belief systems.
These characteristics in the macromarketing literature are captured in the notion of the Dominant Social Paradigm (DSP) (Kilbourne, McDonagh and Prothero 1997). Defined as “a society’s belief structure that organizes the way people perceive and interpret the functioning of the world around them” (Milbrath 1989, 116), the DSP exposes the core ideology of a society’s life philosophy and practices (Kilbourne et al. 1997). As Kilbourne et al. further elaborate; the DSP in contemporary society rotates around embracing happiness through consumption and materialism. This very same ideology remains a recurrent theme in more than five decades of research on sustainability (see Csikszentmihalyi 2000; Ekins 1991; Fisk 1974; Foote 1963; McDonagh and Prothero 2014; Packard and Payne 1957; Polonsky, Kilbourne, and Vocino 2014; Sheth, Sethia, and Srinivas 2011). This stream of research argues that unsustainable modes of production are closely related to the political ideology of neoliberalism that is exclusively preoccupied with the notion of economic growth (Gill 1995). Neoliberalism confines life to the limited boundaries of the market and employs a language that promotes the sovereignty of the consumer in the marketplace (Schwarzkopf 2011), in the sense that the term consumer is used for every aspect of private and social life (Schor 1999). In essence, it privileges the market over society (Assadourian 2010, Fitchett, Patsiaouras, and Davies 2014; Harvey 2011). Such dominant political ideology, in Varey’s (2010, 2011) view is the root cause of ecological crises and no true sustainability can be accomplished within this DSP. Hence, sustainability requires an alternative political system in which the basic principles of production, consumption, distribution and disposition should be driven by the philosophy of ‘collective welfare’. Varey’s thesis is that the market logic should be substituted by ‘eco-logic’, a mindset that describes and prescribes everyday life modes of socioeconomic developments based on eco-logical considerations. This eco-logical ideology also emphasizes the importance of controlling economic growth.
In the same vein, Kilbourne et al. (1997) and Mittelstaedt et al. (2014) argue that ecological crises are directly related to the dominant ideology of socioeconomic growth and nation-states’ competition over the utilization of natural resources in order to gain more competitive advantage in the world’s political economy (see also Hunt 2011). The most common solution offered to tackle this DSP is a paradigm shift towards alternative modes of production and consumption. ‘Societal marketing’ (Lazer 1969; Kotler and Sidney 1969), ‘well-fare marketing’ (Varey 2010, 2011), ‘mindful consumption’ (Sheth et al. 2011) and ‘alternative hedonism’ (Soper 2007) represent some of the most serious discussions on such a paradigm shift. Parallel to these, loss of faith in the sustainability of growth strategies has resulted in the emergence of ‘radical’ or ‘reformist’ approaches to the DSP (Mittelstaedt et al. 2014). Yet, as the literature alludes, options are not abundant. For example, blaming capitalism and neoliberalism, researchers (Chatzidakis, Larsen, and Bishop 2014; Varey 2011) often turn to socialism as a promising political framework that can help deliver collective well-being, including eco-logical equity. However, as Burroughs (2010) contemplates, such solutions are much easier said than done because given the complexity of sustainability, socialism’s controlled growth strategy is less likely to yield positive results.

Interestingly, although the concept of ‘values’ constantly recurs in the extant literature, religions have remained in the periphery. This means that religions are often studied at an attitudinal level without in-depth analysis of the value systems that (re)shape different societies’ worldviews at a macro level (see for example Leary et al. 2016; Minton and Kahle 2014; Minton, Kahle and Kim 2015). As Kilbourne, Beckman, and Thelen (2002) contend, sustainability research should go beyond attitudes and commitment (which are later stages of a multi-stage process) to investigate value systems (at a higher level analysis) that can clearly depict the
position of ecologism and environmentalism in societies’ mindset. Other scholars (Grunert-Beckmann and Kilbourne 1997; Kilbourne et al. 1997; Stern, Dietz and Guagnano 1995) also call for a grassroots approach to the study of sustainability. Such an approach, they argue, should examine the drivers of sustainability, societies’ underlying institutional structures, and their value systems that impact environmental concerns; investigating the symptoms of environmental problems (e.g., green attitudes, recycling habits, and energy consumption) cannot sufficiently lead to fundamental policy change. Layton (2007) argues that consumers’ core religious beliefs regarding man’s relationship with nature have great influence on marketing systems as well as the role that marketing can play in creating a more sustainable future.

Religions and religious beliefs influence activities of the marketplace since religions have a fundamental impact on consumers’ understanding of the world and, consequently, their understanding of markets and market institutions (Mittelstaedt 2002). This article argues that since religions are concerned with value systems and worldviews at a macro level, sustainability discourses can benefit from an understanding of contextualized religious values and faith-based practices to achieve deeper social engagement in ecological sustainability and produce the desired cultural transformation. Such a cultural shift can be facilitated through macromarketing, since macromarketing provides the lens through which the influence of religion in the market is best understood (Mittelstaedt 2002).

As a review of the extant literature indicates, where religions are discussed as value systems, they are often portrayed as problems rather than solutions. For example, Leary et al (2016) conclude that religious individuals exhibit more beliefs of dominion than non-religious individuals and they place the responsibility for sustainability on producers. As such, religiosity,
in the form of anthropocentrism, is viewed as part of the DSP that has historically legitimized human beings’ domination over nature.

There is also ambiguity around the relationship between religion and ecology. For example, prior work (e.g., Botero et al. 2014) highlights that each religious tradition has both negative and positive consequences in terms of ecological sustainability and environmental ethics. Grim and Tucker (2014) also argue that in religious discourses there is often incongruence between the prophetic/transformative and conservative/constraining aspects of religious views. Ecofeminist Heather Eaton (2007) further argues that every religion has oppressive and liberating elements, as well as conservative and conserving values that must be differentiated. These tensions create contradictory interpretations about the role of religion in promoting ecology and sustainable behaviors. Resolving such contradictory views warrants the re-examination of religions with a view to understanding human beings as part of ecosystems. Adopting such a perspective can result in conceiving consumers’ relationship to nature and ecology as cosmic unity; that is, their existence will depend on the physical environment within which they live (White 1967).

Is Religion the Root of the Ecological Problem?

In his controversial article, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”, White Jr. (1967) blames the current ecological crisis on Judeo-Christianity and its western historical traditions, claiming that Christianity, in its western form, is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. According to the author, western religions have endorsed the destruction of Earth by establishing the dualism of man vs. nature and the transcendence of the former over the latter. Made in God’s image, man is not part of nature but above it. God gave man the privilege of
naming animals, hence giving man dominion over nature. White Jr. takes sporadic biblical
excerpts such as “to fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28) as evidence of the
anthropocentrism of the Judeo-Christian tradition and its approval of human sovereignty over
nature. Tracing the history of Christian traditions since medieval times, he then argues that the
pursuit of excessive land cultivation, science, technology and exploitive capitalism in the name
of “progress” gave western societies power, but this power would eventually lead to the demise
of humanity. An interesting point in White Jr.’s thesis is that he also deems religion imperative to
combating the ecological crisis. White argues that religion is both the problem and the solution.
His rationale is that more science and technology will not solve our ecological crisis. Given the
power of religion in inserting change on people’s worldview – as it did by legitimizing man’s
superiority over nature – religion can use the same power to reverse the process.

Other critics pose more severe views. For example, Feuerbach (1957, p. 287) criticizes
Christianity for its instrumental use of nature for the sake of human salvation in the world
hereafter: “Nature, the world, has no value, no interest for Christians. The Christian thinks only
of himself and the salvation of his soul.” The very same idea is reinforced in Nash’s (1991)
“ecological complaint against Christianity” where he argues that “Christianity legitimates
ecological degradation” and that “The ecological complaint is the charge that the Christian faith
is the culprit in the crisis. Christianity is the primary, or at least a significant, cause of ecological
degradation” (pp. 94-95). Eco-feminists go even further to argue that anthropocentrism is but a
symptom of androcentrism (patriarchy) which is inherent in all world religions (see for e.g.
Merchant 1998; Plumwood 2002; Sandilands 1999; Seager 1993; Soper 1995; Warren 2000),
hence the domination of nature is connected to the domination of women. Yet, even among
ecofeminists, opinions about the role of religion are mixed with some arguing that ecofeminist
research which does not include religious analysis misconstrues the role of religion within
ecofeminism resulting in a distorted, essentialist, bourgeois and white presentation of
ecofeminism (Page 2007).

These criticisms and contradictions, according to many theologians and religious
environmentalists, are associated with the complexity of religious texts, which are subject to
multiple interpretations, and people’s lack of in-depth familiarity with religious teachings
(Tirosh-Samuelson 2005). Bouma-Prediger (2009) in particular rejects the accusations made
against Christianity for their shaky rationale: “In my judgment the ecological complaint against
Christianity is seriously flawed.” Such accusations, he argues, fail to acknowledge the 2000 year
gap between the advent of Christianity and today’s ecological crisis. Natural degradation, in
Bouma-Prediger’s view, is a direct result of mankind’s divorce from nature in search of
economic gain. This is a similar theme in Nasr’s (1997) thesis. Nasr forcefully argues that in its
applications, modern science has lost touch with the divine. Ecological crisis in modern society
is due to human beings’ spiritual vacuum and detachment from nature and the sacred and their
overreliance on materialism, scientism, and positivism. In other words, by abandoning the sacred
and secularization of science man declared “war against nature”. As regards, Nasr deems the
reconciliation of science with the spiritual traditions of religions pivotal to combating ecological
crises. Heather Eaton, a theologian and eco-feminist, makes a similar argument: “it is naive to
assume that we in the West live in cultures which have moved beyond the dark side of the Judeo-
Christian tradition, or that we are isolated from such teachings due to personal religious practices
or abstentions. It is also false to believe that these religious traditions can be solely defined by
their negative or destructive aspects” (Eaton 1995, p. 29). Prominent ecofeminist Christian
theologians like Heather Eaton, Yvonne Gebara, Greta Gaard and Rosemary Radford Ruether
call for new interpretations of religious teachings where conservative and conservation values in religions are differentiated and clarified.

The following section elaborates the core relationship between man and nature from the lens of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which are construed by many as anthropocentric religions. In the interest of brevity, a few excerpts from the religious geneses are presented. Here, it should be emphasized that this review is not a thorough reflection of religions; rather, it only demonstrates that accusations against religion are founded on incomplete interpretations of the creeds. Such readings disregard the key concept of responsibility and its mandates stressed by religions.

The Judaic Perspective

Interpretations of the Judaic texts such as the Torah, Mishnah, and Talmud base environmental ethics on the doctrine of creation (Tirosh-Samuelson 2005; Tirosh-Samuelson 2001), which departs from the fact that only human species were created “in the image of God” (Genesis 1.26-27) and that they were ‘formed out of the earth’ and to it they shall return (Genesis 2.15). The Psalms invites humans to contemplate the beauty, order, and wise design of nature, which leads to thanksgiving and praising God like all creature do: “The heavens are telling the glory of God/and the firmament proclaims his handiworks” (Psalms 19.1). Hence, being privileged species and being part of the natural order place a moral responsibility on humans, as stewards of God’s creation, to protect nature (Tirosh-Samuelson 2005; Tirosh-Samuelson 2001). Being entrusted with nature’s well-being, Judaists are commanded by God to cultivate lands, care for other creatures, “repair of the world”, be just and responsible, and to not destroy trees even in times of war, as indicated in Deuteronomy 20: 19-20: “When thou besiegest a city many days to bring it into thy power by making war against it, thou shalt not destroy the trees thereof
by swinging an axe against them; for from them mayest thou eat but not destroy them, for the

tree of the field is man’s life…” (Freudenstein 1970; Tirosh-Samuelson 2005; Tirosh-Samuelson
2001).

The covenantal relationship between God and man supports the concept of social ecology
by drawing a linkage between social and ecological corruption, and therefore, an ideal Jew is
considered to be one that holds the virtues of humility, modesty, and moderation (Tirosh-
Samuelson 2001). Humility refers to a state of awareness of the fact that humans are created by
God, and are thereafter subordinate to His will. As for modesty, it is the avoidance of
conspicuous consumption and greed, and the realization during consumption that resources of
the world are diminishing. The virtue of moderation is the reduction in consumption and
awareness of our relation to other people and living creatures.

‘Sustainability’ does not explicitly appear in Jewish texts simply because the term is a
modern one; yet, it is hinted at through the emphasis of its ecological, social, and economic
dimensions. Jewish traditions and teachings address issues of environmental protection (water,
soil, air, trees, and mineral resources), agriculture, urban planning, noise control, waste
management, intergenerational justice, warfare, budget management, animal protection and
ethics, diet, and consumption in general (Immergut 2008; Freudenstein 1970; Reinhardt 2014).
For instance, regarding pollution abatement, it is prohibited, even in war time, to discharge
sewage into rivers rather than its burial into the ground (Freudenstein 1970), as mentioned in
Deuteronomy 23: 13-15: “And thou shalt have a place outside the (military) camp, thither shalt
thou go out, and a spade shalt thou have with thy accoutrements, so that when thou sittest down
outside thou shalt dig therewith, and turn back and cover again that which cometh from thee”.

The Christian Perspective
The available literature on the Christian perspective on sustainability points out a difference in eco-theological views. This is due to the fact that there are different versions and interpretations of the Bible among the Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Evangelical, Lutheran, and other sects (Grønvold 2013; Petersen 1999; Sandelands and Hoffman 2008). However, there is a general consensus that God has created man in His image, and that He created Earth and its resources for humans to use and enjoy (Grønvold 2013; Sandelands and Hoffman 2008):

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness, so they may rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move on the earth.” God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply! Fill the earth and subdue it! Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every creature that moves on the ground. (Genesis 1: 26–28)

It is texts of this kind that are often taken as evidence of an anthropocentric view, one that fosters a dualism of man and nature and thereby leading to the devaluation of the rest of creation and nature (Grønvold 2013). Such interpretations have stimulated further arguments over anthropocentrism versus biocentrism in Christianity, and the relationship of God-human, God-nature, human-nature, and the least emphasized relation between human beings themselves (Grønvold 2013; Petersen 1999). To address such allegations of anthropocentrism, Wirzba (2003) argues that biblical religions have potent resources for environmentalism. More pointedly, Wirzba contends that anthropocentricism is a matter of (mis)interpretation in the sense that dominion does not imply privileges and a license to destroy; on the contrary, it stresses the responsibility to care for Earth as God’s creation.
In Grønvold’s (2013) view, the meanings of biocentrism, inter-human relations, and human-nature relations can be understood with reference to the Bible, especially in Genesis 2:4–24 which reads as “God created man...from the soil of the earth...Man is thus not above creation, but made from it, shaped from the very ground he stands on”, and also in Genesis 4 about “the story of Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve, where after Cain has killed his brother, the Lord hears the blood of Abel crying out to him from the earth and punishes Cain by cursing him (verse 10), so that the soil of the earth will no longer be fruitful to him (verse 12)”. Likewise, Genesis 2:4–7, 15 reads:

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created— when the Lord God made the earth and heavens. Now no shrub of the field had yet grown on the earth, and no plant of the field had yet sprouted, for the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the earth, and there was no man to cultivate the ground. Springs would well up from the earth and water the whole surface of the ground. The Lord God formed the man from the soil of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. … The Lord God took the man and placed him in the orchard in Eden to care for it and to maintain it.

Such examples clearly testify to the importance of man’s responsibility before nature, as a basic tenet of sustainability. To further complement this defense, Sandelands and Hoffman (2008) illustrate how sustainability is embedded within the doctrines of Christianity. The authors associate sustainability with anthropic, relational, ethical, and divine love principles. They also demonstrate how modern concepts of economic sustainability and growth are addressed in the religion. For example, with reference to Catholic Church’s Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (CSDC), they argue that religion, at a macro level, advocates a sustainable
economic growth in the light of eight key principles of unity and meaning, common good, universal destination, subsidiarity, participation, solidarity, social values, and love.

*The Islamic Perspective*

Islam adopts a holistic approach towards developing an environmental ethical theory, which is derived from the Koranic system of values and sayings of Prophet Muhammad (hadith). The Koran refers to nature as God’s creation, and an assembly of orderly, meaningful, and purposive phenomena that manifest the power, wisdom, and mercy of its Creator (Ozdemir 2003). It also asserts that God created a universal balance and nature is in fact meaningful, purposeful, and even Moslem (submissive to God) just like humans. Hence, it is the duty of humans to preserve this universal balance in their everyday life interactions with the environment and protect God’s creatures (Dien 1997; Ozdemir 2003). In the Koran, nature is even elevated to a personified position in which it actively praises God in ways that man cannot understand: “The seven heavens and the earth and whatever is in them exalt Him. And there is not a thing except that it exalts [Allah] by His praise, but you do not understand their [way of] exalting. Indeed, He is ever forbearing and forgiving” (17:44). Similarly, Prophet Muhammad says: “Some trees are as blessed as the Moslem himself, especially the palm.”

On the subject of man-nature relationship, the concept of ‘stewardship’ stands out in the Koran (2:30 & 6:165). Although humans are privileged creatures, they are not the masters of nature to use it as their property, only God is the master (Ozdemir 2003). Humans are bestowed with stewardship by the Almighty (Afrasiabi 2003), and as God’s vicegerents and servants on Earth, nature has been entrusted to us (Ozdemir 2003). As Afrasiabi (2003) and Dien (1997) also stress, the Koran (33:72) explicitly mentions that this trusteeship comes with an ethical responsibility that no other creature dared to assume: “Indeed, we offered the Trust to the
heavens and the earth and the mountains, and they declined to bear it and feared it; but man undertook to bear it. Indeed, he was unjust and ignorant”. Humans are warned that they are responsible and accountable for their actions on Earth, as the hadith states: “Verily, this world is sweet and appealing, and Allah placed you as vicegerents therein; He will see what you do”.

The Koran asserts that God created resources in limited quantities and that everything exists in balance. Humans, as stewards on Earth, should act responsibly by enjoying these resources, but in moderation. This restriction in the quantity of resources is said to be in favor of humans who are more likely to act irresponsibly and lavishly when resources are abundant. God also warns that He does not like wastefulness and overspending; such acts are punishable (Chuvieco 2012; Dien 1997; Grine et al. 2013; Kula 2001). Hadiths by Prophet Muhammad also touch upon the concept of sustainability, when he says: “Live in this world as if you will live in it forever, and live for the next world as if you will die tomorrow”, and “When doomsday comes if someone has a palm shoot in his hand, then he should plant it” (Foltz, Denny and Baharuddin 2003). The Koran and hadiths clearly promote the principles of and guidelines for sustainability which are reflected in the ideas of justice, balance, modesty, mercy, trustworthiness and custodianship, spiritual purity and physical cleanliness, truthfulness and rights, usefulness of knowledge and science (Chuvieco 2012).

Traditional accounts of the deeds (Sunnah) and sayings of Prophet Muhammad also dwell into various contemporary sustainability issues such as the importance of water conservation, pollution and waste reduction, sustainable land use, cultivation and greening, and animal welfare (Chuvieco 2012; Dien 1997; Foltz, Denny and Baharuddin 2003; Grine, et al. 2013; Kula 2001). For instance, Prophet Muhammad placed great importance on the moderate use of water and forbade the excessive use of it even when performing ablutions (Islamic practice of washing
certain body parts prior to prayer), saying that doing so was “detestable” even if there were no
water scarcity (Ozdemir 2003).

From the above discussions it becomes apparent that Abrahamic religions do indeed
include texts and teachings that hold man responsible for sustainable use of resources bestowed
upon him. The above perspectives demonstrate that religions can participate in the sustainability
discourse by promoting humility, modesty, moderation, moral values (e.g. charity, mercy and
doing no harm), as well as man’s responsibility towards nature at large. As Eaton (2007)
proposes, such values can be utilized in order to more effectively conserve nature and resolve the
world’s ecological problems that arise from human beings’ unsustainable life practices.

As explained earlier, the root cause of ecological crisis should primarily be searched in
man’s pursuit of happiness and unquenchable desires through unleashed materialism and
consumerism (Assadourian 2010, Sandel 2012; Hurst et al. 2013), man’s over-reliance on
science as the key to welfare (Dunbar 1995; Nasr 1997), society’s market-oriented narcissism
and the collapse of morality (Wallis 2010). The collapse of morality and ethics in society may be
traced to their marginalization in education (Reuben 1996), where tertiary education views only
scientific facts as “true knowledge”, and where “standard moral values” could not be validated as
scientific and hence do not constitute “true knowledge”. Using an institutional approach to trace
the separation of “facts” and “values” in education, Reuben (1996) relates this separation to the
link between morality and religion. Since religion was perceived to be dogmatic, unscientific and
incompatible with progress, morality was also abandoned. Ghoshal (2005) further argues that
morality is completely absent from most management and marketing theories, blaming many of
the corporate scandals in the US on business school curricula.
Perhaps, it is because of the rising detrimental costs of our unsustainable life modes, the marginalization of morality in society, and modern institutions’ imperfection that attentions have been once again drawn to religion, as a resource, in establishing the required moral framework needed for re-establishing sustainability (Wallis 2010). In the following section, we provide a religious framework for a cultural transformation towards sustainability.

A Religious Framework for the Advancement of Sustainability

A thorough understanding of the macromarketing environment for the advancement of sustainability can benefit from the inclusion of religions and religious institutions, as important social forces that influence marketing systems (Mittelstaedt, 2002). Religions and religious institutions shape activities in the market place through exerting four types of authority: political, institutional, social and competitive (Mittelstaedt, 2002). Political authority refers to the exercise of direct authority to regulate aspects of the market through, for example, religious sanctions. Institutional authority reflects religion’s power in controlling nonmarket institutions (e.g., diet, marriage and family) that can have indirect effects on market related behaviors. For example, when religion controls the dominant social paradigm in a society, it will influence consumption patterns to an extent that sustainable consumption can become the prevailing social paradigm (Mittelstaedt, 2002). Social authority enables religion to shape social behaviors and cultural beliefs through religious teachings thereby defining the boundaries of acceptable market behaviors. Lastly, competitive religious authority is exercised when religious organizations compete in the marketplace by offering goods and services.

Macromarketers’ engagement with scholars of religions can enhance their understanding of local cultural contexts and their diverse sets of rituals, teachings, texts and symbols that are largely informed by religions. Such engagement can expose them to new interpretations of
religious experiences and a worldview that is not solely based on socioeconomic gains or hierarchal structures of domination. Acquiring such knowledge can help macromarketers to collaborate with religious institutions and policymakers in order to harness the various sources of religious authority to bring about the desired gradual cultural transformation to sustainability.

The social power of religions is a key reason for the inclusion of religious perspectives in the ecological sustainability project. Religions and religious institutions possess six bases of power that enable them to effect the desired change in ecological attitudes and behaviors: referent, coercive, reward, informational, expert and legitimate powers (Raven 1999). Besides, religious communities around the world are still powerful in terms of mobilizing the masses. This can be seen as an opportunity to recruit a biocentric theology that would call upon their related religious communities to adopt ecologism where and when most suitable.

A constructive theological framework includes the interactions between actors and stakeholders such as macromarketers, religious leaders, scholars, public and governmental institutions, international organizations, and consumers. More specifically, macromarketers should collaborate with religious leaders and policy makers to identify conserving values and make them parts of public discourses. Such a conceptual framework highlights a different interpretation of religion that can help shape positive attitudes towards the environment and promote a sustainable discourse. By adopting a biocentric theological approach based on a contextualized perspective of how individuals define and conceive religion and its role in promoting ecological sustainability, this framework goes beyond the monolithic and anthropocentric approach in the present theology and ecology literatures, involving multiple factors and actors from a macro perspective. A central challenge is to bring all the stakeholders
together through incorporating the depths of religious philosophy and discourses into a modern and meaningful dialogue that focuses on the multiple aspects of environmental crises.

An obstacle in a framework to the advancement of religious engagement in sustainability is anthropocentrism. Grønvold (2013) argues that a cultural transformation to sustainability requires a shift from an anthropocentric theology towards a biocentric theology. A biocentric theology is where all of God’s creations are regarded as equally important and man and nature are viewed as interdependent (Grønvold 2013). A more biocentric religious interpretation of religious texts and teachings can help renew the definition and the role of religion in advancing ecological sustainability. Therefore, maromarketers, religious scholars, and policy makers should first focus on understanding the main barriers related to promoting a biocentric religious discourse on sustainability to enable macromarketers to incorporate that biocentric discourse into macromarketing.

Another obstacle is the negative role religious institutions have historically played in wars and oppression of societies (e.g., opposing alternative lifestyles, gender equality, and freedom of speech). Much destruction and death have been and are being committed in the name of religion, from the Crusades, to the Salem witch hunts, to the more recent atrocities by the selfclaimed Islamic State (see Jafari and Sandıkçı 2016). While these factors may have influenced people’s skepticism towards religious institutions and hindered the potential role religions can play in promoting sustainability, Campbell (1975) argues that society’s hostility towards religions’ perceived “inhibitory force” is rather exaggerated. Despite their many failings, religions have contributed to the development of societies through their power of social control. Campbell (1975) and Raven (1999) argue that social evolution would not have been possible without religion. Social evolution requires the practice of socially desirable behaviors like
charity, altruism and cooperation, behaviors that are at the core of all religions. A major challenge for macromarketers is therefore to reposition and redefine the new role for conserving/biocentric religious values in contemporary society where the prevailing logic is based on existing dichotomies. Such dichotomies are reflected in the separation between intellect and faith, theology and science, religious leaders and religious scholars, state and religious institutions, religion as private and religion as mundane, and irrationality/emotion and rationality/functionalism.

Such a transformation is not a remote possibility; for there is growing evidence that religions are moving towards a biocentric theology. For example, the present Ecumenical Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church, Bartholomew I, has been heavily investing in promoting collaborations between religions and the scientific community for the protection of the environment since his election is 1991. More recently, Pope Francis has made the environment part of his agenda. The emphasis of Pope Francis’s predecessors was a preoccupation with the moral and structural harms of modernity. Pope Francis, on the other hand, has emphasized the importance of ecological conservation and the harms of ecological destruction and climate change by showing the sources of this theological emphasis. In his encyclical, Pope Francis released a warning on the destruction of human environment that draws on both theology and scientific research to challenge people to become better guardians of creation. This is in line with Catterall’s (2013) research that demonstrates how an ecologically sustainable future can be shaped by a complex engagement with religious traditions along with modernity and globalization. For Catterall, there is a need for researchers studying ecology to go beyond religious/secular and tradition/modernity dichotomies to better understand the engagement of social actors and institutions with nature and environment.
A profound understanding of sustainability values among the multiple stakeholders can be gained by adopting a grounded theory (GT) approach following the recommendations of Samuel and Peattie (2016). Samuel and Peattie (2016) argue that GT is a particularly valuable method in macromarketing research topics since they involve complex stakeholder relationships that require the consideration of multiple variables simultaneously. GT allows for mixed data collection methods, such as data from ethnography, observation and interviewing as well as diverse sets of actors to enable the researcher to understand and explain what is happening from multiple perspectives (McCallin 2003). Such an approach to macromarketing research allows for a deeper understanding of the relationships and interfaces among consumers, religious institutions, businesses, local governments, civic institutions, policymakers, beliefs, identities and patterns of behavior that socially construct marketplaces (Samuel and Peattie 2015).

Engaging Religions in Ecological Conservation

Although sustainability had never been absent from religious doctrines, it was only towards the end of the twentieth century that formal initiatives were established in order to engage religions more seriously in ecological debates. For example, in 1986 the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) International invited five major faiths (i.e., Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism) to Assisi, Italy to explore the ways they could work together on environmental issues. The encounter was so successful that it led to the establishment of a new international nonprofit organization in 1995, the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC). By 2000, six more faiths had joined the Alliance: Baha’ism, Daoism, Jainism, Shintoism, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism. Now, through partnerships with local governments and NGOs, the organization has projects across the world [www.arcworld.org](http://www.arcworld.org). Parallel to this, the Islamic Foundation for
Ecology and Environmental Science (IFEES) was also established in the mid 1980s with the aim of spreading awareness, training and ecological knowledge among Moslem communities based on Islamic ethics and approaches to environmental protection.

Academia has also shown interest in the intersection of religion and sustainability. Some universities now offer graduate programs in religion and ecology like the University of Toronto, Drew University and the University of Florida and Yale. Environmental studies programs, predominantly oriented as science and policy programs, are now encouraging participation of religious studies or incorporating religious studies (Tucker 2008). The Forum on Religion and Ecology and Harvard University co-sponsored a three year long series of conferences culminating in the publishing of an encyclopedia on ecology and world religions (Gottlieb 2006). The purpose of the series was to unearth the common elements of world religions that emphasize human-Earth relations. Religions studied in this series included the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), the Asian religions (Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism and Shinto), as well as indigenous religions and resulted in 10 edited and published volumes on Religion and Ecology. Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology, and Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture are academic journals that are dedicated to the study of religions and ecology. Taylor’s (2004) detailed review of the literature on religion and ecology indicates that religions are becoming greener, a trend in which nature is increasingly regarded as sacred by world religions. Such growth also lends itself to the rising ecological awareness among religious groups in an era where religions are criticized for their ‘indifference’ (Nash 1991) to ecological crisis.

In a time of grim environmental outlook, growing religious environmentalism should be regarded as a source of optimism. Examples of how this rising religious environmentalism is
resulting in wide-reaching political action are abundant. The Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale University provides a series of such examples. In the interest of brevity, we outline only a few examples here: the “Redwood Rabbis”, relying on Judaic teachings and traditions, took a stand against deforestation and commercial clear-cutting and succeeded in protecting redwood trees in northern California. The Methodist Church in the US succeeded in preventing Staples stores from selling paper that caused dioxin pollution in the way it was manufactured. “Green Muslims” in Washington D.C. assists the Moslem community with spiritually-inspired environmental education, reflection, and action. In all these cases, religion assists scientific methods (e.g. sustainability solutions and technologies) and modern administrations (e.g. NGOs) with a broader scope in which to envisage, devise and operationalize sustainability more effectively and efficiently. Such success stories confirm that religions can offer an alternative lens through which to frame ecological problems that have traditionally been seen as social problems with ecological implications.

Religion as a Change Agent

Religions can help macromarketers operationalize sustainability in more cost-effective ways, particularly in contexts where socio-political and economic institutions are less- or under-developed or are not sufficiently operant. Such a mission can be accomplished because religious institutions often have five key assets: the capability to shape worldviews, community building capacity, moral authority, considerable material resources, and a large number of followers (Gardner and Assadourian 2004). Religious environmentalism, therefore, can make valuable contributions to promoting and implementing sustainability. Prior research (e.g. Chuvieco 2012; Mohamad et al. 2012; Palmer and Finlay 2003) has already documented the way communities
deal with changes in habits to more sustainable ways through religious values. Palmer and Finlay (2003), in particular, provide a comprehensive view of western and eastern religions and present several cases that empirically reveal the power of religion in enacting ecological practices:

Case 1: The Fishermen of Tanzania

In Tanzania, fishermen, who are part of poor religious communities, were somehow introduced to using dynamite in their fishing. The use of dynamite enabled them to make large catches in a short period of time, but it also resulted in detrimental destruction of marine life. The Tanzanian government along with some environmental agencies, tried to deter the fishermen through launching an educational program. Being part of a marginalized community, the fishermen did not pay much attention to the leaflets distributed by the government and the NGOs. The government then issued a ban on dynamite fishing; yet again this legislative action did not deter the practice either. The small villages where the fishermen lived were almost all Moslem and they lived in accordance with the teachings of Islam and the Koran, its Shari’ah laws and traditions. These communities were organized under the leadership of religious Sheikhs (or Imams) who are part of these communities and have widespread authority in such villages. In 1998, following efforts led by several NGOs (WWF, ARC and IFEES) the Sheikhs came together to discuss Islamic teachings in relation to the appropriate use of God’s creations. By drawing on Koranic verses like “O children of Adam! ... eat and drink: but waste not by excess for Allah loveth not the wasters” (7:31), the Sheikhs came to the conclusion that dynamite fishing was an illegal practice according to Islam. In 2000, the Moslem Sheikhs banned dynamite fishing and taught the fishermen that dynamite fishing risked incurring the wrath of God and damnation of their soul. In 2003, in collaboration with ecologists and guided by a more profound interpretation of their faith, the fishermen started implementing sustainable fishing practices. In
this case, based on a deeper interpretation of man’s relationship with nature, religion succeeded where legislation and awareness programs failed because “it made sense within the people’s culture and worldview” (Palmer and Finlay 2003, 5).

Case 2: The Forest of Harissa – Lebanon

Over the past 20 years, Lebanon has seen massive urbanization along its coastline, destroying rare ecological systems. The WWF lists Mediterranean woodlands among the top 200 most important ecosystems in the world to be protected. The United Nations Environmental Program, along with other environmental NGOs, identified the Mediterranean coast as a priority for preservation. In the late 1990s, the ancient forest of Harissa still remained and the UNEP took steps to ensure its protection from urbanization. A 50 page long document detailing scientific, legal and economic information demanding the protection of the forest was sent to the land owners, the Maronite Church of Lebanon. Unsurprisingly, they got no response. The Church has maintained ownership of the forest for over 1,000 years and the priests were not oblivious to its ecological significance. However, to these priests the significance of the forest had to do with much more than ecological consideration, for in its center stood the Cathedral of Our Lady, with a giant outdoor statue of the Virgin Mary, Protector of Lebanon. Yet the document sent to the Church contained no mention of the forest’s spiritual, cultural or emotional significance. The ARC and WWF ran a program called “Sacred Gifts for a Living Planet”, which was designed to foster commitment of communities to the environment based on people’s religious views on the environment. The Church was re-approached by re-framing the Harissa Forest as a Sacred Gift that must be protected. Within 30 minutes the Patriarch committed the Church to protect the Forest for eternity. By relating to the Church’s worldview through an understanding of Maronite theology and culture, the group was able to achieve the desired outcome.
Case 3: Saving the Tigers in China

Demand for traditional Chinese medicine is on the increase, both within and outside of China. This commercialization of Chinese traditional medicine has rendered it a major industry that is unconnected with its original roots as it is environmentally unfriendly. Some prescriptions in traditional Chinese medicine call for rare ingredients such as rhino horn and tiger bones which have a devastating effect on wildlife species. Even though the Chinese government has made such ingredients illegal, the trade continues and poaching has led some species to the brink of extinction. To eradicate this practice, it was important to reach illegal practitioners and their clients and this was only possible through Daoists. Chinese medicine has its worldview based on the belief in the Dao, the oneness of the universe and yin and yang, the two natural forces of opposites. Once the Daoists were approached to help on this issue, they offered profound philosophical yet practical solutions. Referring to the roots of traditional Chinese medicine, the Daoists reached the conclusion that any remedy made of ingredients that endangered any species or caused unjustifiable suffering to animals would not work; for it is not possible to heal one species by destroying another or by afflicting suffering on another part of the universal Dao. In 1999 the Daoist Association of China declared that any practitioner who used medicine that conflicted with the Daoist laws of balance would be ostracized. They further provided alternative ingredients that, based on a study of their ancient medical scriptures, did not involve endangered species or cruelty against animals.

Palmer and Finlay (2003)’s work is endorsed by Mohamad et al.’s (2012) study of multi-faith communities in Malaysia. The study provides evidence for the role of religious communities in promoting the adoption of recycling as a form of environmental practice among Christian, Moslem and Buddhist communities. The authors’ cross examination of several
religious communities’ recycling practices indicates that such communities were able to conduct long-term recycling programs by using their institutional structure as a conducive platform for recycling activities and their collective potential to expand their programs to the broader community. Such achievements were highly mediated by their commitment to religious values. Mohamad et al.’s work specifically highlights the need for thinking beyond ‘whether or not religion can help sustainability’ to contemplate how and where religion can best address contextual environmental problems.

Other studies further support Mohamed et al.’s thesis. The work of Al-Khatib (2009) and Al-Khatib et al. (2009) in Palestine indicate that moral and religious convictions positively influence people’s behavior in terms of avoiding littering and polluting the environment. These studies reveal that compared to intrinsic religious beliefs, popular methods of traditional awareness campaigns (e.g., TV and print media) are less effective. Similarly, Immergut’s (2008) investigation of Adamah (Earth) Fellowship (a multi-denominational Jewish, sustainable and organic farming program in Northwestern Connecticut) reveals how these reflexively young Jews endeavor to use religious language, text and ritual to create a meaningful relationship with nature. These individuals also embark on external resources in order to enrich their existing Jewish religious traditions and renew a religiously inspired relationship to the earth. Last but not least, Yoreh (2010) argues that rabbinical leaders are instrumental in garnering support for recycling programs in Ultra-Orthodox communities in Jerusalem. He even goes far to say: “It can even be said that there is no need to convince the Haredi communities of the benefits of recycling. If the rabbinical leaders are convinced then their communities will follow suit” (p. 338).
It should be stressed that these cases do not call for an institutional supremacy of religions (i.e., issues of power and control in the Foucauldian sense, see Jafari and Sandıkçı, 2015); rather they serve to demonstrate the potent power of religious values and worldviews in tackling the consequences of consumptive practices on ecological degradation. The purpose of these cases is to illustrate what macromarketers can learn from faith-based sustainability initiatives; the priests in Lebanon did not preserve the forest because of its ecological and biodiversity value, but because the forest was sacred to them. Similarly, the fishermen of Tanzania did not stop dynamite fishing because of their concern for marine life, but because they were afraid of the wrath of God. Traditionally, sustainability discourses have been discussed within frameworks that emphasize environmental degradation and the consequences of consumptive practices for the environment. Therefore, there is a need for adopting contextualized approaches and relating sustainability discourses to target consumers’ value systems and worldviews that may be religious in nature. Numerous case studies in Taylor’s (2008) ‘Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature’ and Gottlieb’s (2010) ‘The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology’ testify to the advantages of adopting contextualized religion-oriented approaches to sustainability.

Solving ecological problems calls for moral pluralism (Norton 1991; Wenz 1993) and engaging in multiple value systems. It is therefore not enough to examine cultural ideas and beliefs, what is needed is a deep analysis and a profound understanding and theorizing of material realities and practices of a community with respect to the intersection of religion and nature to produce new insights into the relationship between religion and nature that can facilitate cultural transformation for ecological conservation. The cases cited above are examples of how collaboration between religious institutions, policy makers, marketers and NGOs can
result in such desired cultural transformation. A thorough analysis of the cultural context, local religious teachings and understanding of cultural rituals, texts and symbols is necessary for new interpretations of religious experiences that will enable the transition to new lines of macromarketing research and practice in the advancement of ecological sustainability.

Conclusions, Contributions and Future Research

In his paper “Reinventing Marketing to Manage the Environmental Imperative” Kotler (2011) called for a re-examination of marketing theories and practices that have traditionally been based on assumptions of unlimited resources. He concluded his paper with a call on marketing researchers to investigate: 1) the factors that lead consumers to engage in sustainable behaviors, 2) the changes needed in marketing theories, and 3) the practices required to encourage sustainability. The World Economic Forum Report (2010) stressed the importance of linking faith, as the basis of enduring moral values, with regulatory mechanisms proposed as solutions to global crises. Varey (2010) called for a “fundamental shift in worldview and value system”. He argued that there is tension between cultural and natural systems and that sustainability can only thrive in ecologically and ethically responsible behaviors which can only be made possible in a different system.

In this article, and in response to these calls, we proposed a value-based approach towards ecological sustainability. Specifically, we argued that there should be a dialogue between sustainability and religious discourses given that: 1) many ethical consumer behaviors are imbedded in religious moral values (Wenell 2009), and 2) religions and religious institutions have social and normative influences on consumer behaviors (Raven 1999). Religions are thus potent vehicles for framing ecological sustainability discourses.
While religions are worldviews, their contributions to ecological conservation are not merely conceptual. For ecological conservation efforts to have transformative effect, approaches must be connected to cultural realities and contextualized in religious and cultural values and practices. However, a rights-based system of ethics, which dominates the current interpretation of religions, is inadequate to foster ecological sustainability (Eaton 1995). A cultural transformation through a new interpretation of religion is not a farfetched proposition. For example, Pope Francis has made sustainability and ecological protection an integral part of his agenda: “Any harm done to the environment, therefore, is harm done to humanity,” he said on 25th September 2015 in a speech to the UN.

Where religions are studied in macromarketing debates on sustainability, they are treated as problematic. This article provided a case towards considering religious values as potent drivers of cultural change. Discussions put forward so far provided a positive response to the three objectives outlined in the introduction. Firstly, it was argued that given their macro and intrinsic value systems, religions can broaden the scope of sustainability research. They can bring another set of macro worldviews/frameworks in which sustainability discourse can go beyond dilemmas over whether socialism can or should replace capitalism. Secondly, the cases discussed in the article demonstrated that there are many lessons to be learned from faith-based sustainability initiatives. In particular, it became evident that the operationalization of sustainability requires institutional collaborations. Such institutions are not ubiquitous around the world. Especially in societies where formal modern institutions (i.e., governments and environmental agencies) are not existent or sufficiently operant, contextualized cultural and religious approaches can play a significant role in initiating cultural transformation towards ecological sustainability. Thirdly, it was showed that interreligious dialogues can facilitate the
transfer of knowledge among macromarketers, different religious/faith groups, policymakers and environmental activists. Given their enduring effects in spite of modernizations (Inglehart and Baker 2000), established historical trajectories, and wealth of knowledge accumulated over time, religions can significantly contribute to the ongoing work on sustainability.

Other benefits of including religions/faiths in macromarketing’s sustainability research follow: major religions/faiths are transnational in nature. This provides a great opportunity to reach out to a diversity of local/regional communities whose sustainability practices can be analyzed. The results of such studies can contribute to the theorizations of sustainability. They can also inform policy in terms of understanding which communication methods should be used for which type of populations. Religions/faiths, in essence, advocate holistic values systems that embrace union with nature and the environment in its totality, modesty, frugality, altruism, spirituality and the like. Therefore, they can help unify disparate sustainability movements that are often anchored in particular political ideologies (e.g., left, radical, and reformist).

Macromarketing research and practice inform and are informed by our understanding of the symbiotic relationship between religion and the market (i.e., religion’s influence on markets and markets’ influence on religion) (Mittelstaedt, 2002). Future research in macromarketing should, therefore, endeavor to systematically engage with religions in order to broaden the conceptual scope of ecological, social as well as economic sustainability. Such a task requires an interdisciplinary approach to the study of religions and sustainability. In doing so, while in-depth studies of each single religion/faith is a necessity, research findings should be amalgamated in larger international research centers, tracks, and forums. A useful way of achieving such ends can be adopting a grounded theory approach following Samuel and Peattie (2016) in order to have a fresh understanding of the sustainability mechanisms and values among such groups.
Additionally, action-based research should be more encouraged among doctoral researchers who embark on such research topics. However, given the time-consuming nature of action research and the logistic/financial requirements, more collaboration should be established between academic researchers, social policy institutions and NGOs.

With the growing recognition of religious and spiritual values in shaping a sustainable future, stakeholders such as macromarketing practitioners, policymakers, religious institutions, and world organizations (e.g. UNEP, UNESCO) should define a common policy by applying a multidimensional approach to sustainability within a religious framework. Further, macromarketers, policy makers, and world organization should engage in a meaningful dialogue with religious institutions in a manner that would lead to recognizing conservation values and common responsibility in terms of ecological issues.

Achieving these objectives requires macromarketers to recognize the potential of contextualized religious approaches to sustainability in everyday life practices and the positive role they can play in this mission (Bouma-Prediger 2009; Al Khatib 2009). On the other hand, mainstream scientists in the field of ecology, governmental agencies, and international organizations can integrate ‘green religion’ within their ‘secular green’ policies to emphasize the continuum with faith and religious values. To do so, secular institutions should remain open-minded in learning from religions and abandon their unidimensional approach to resolving ecological problems with the help of science alone. In Einstein’s (1941) words, “Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.”
References


