

Risk Society and Religion¹

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The Risk Society thesis warns us not only about the rise and change of type of risks that the whole world is facing, but also about everyday life people's knowledge of it and its consequent rise in anxiety. Looking at the arguments about sustainable development and change within the field of religion, in the light of this Risk Society thesis, this paper argues that sustainable development must take into account the warnings from this thesis and that development, when creating 'goods' (e.g. wealth), must avoid the emergence of 'bads' (e.g. risks); that is development must move towards a 'reflexive developmental' approach. Contrary to the mainstream opinion that religions are not involved in this kind of dialogue, this paper underlines the fact that there are religious groups who are active in sustainable and reflexive development (e.g. Ecotheology and neo-pagan groups), and some (e.g. fundamentalist groups) offer some island of security to people's rise of anxiety. This paper then raises the assumption that if, among other factors, sustainable and reflexive development fail to stop the rise of risks and of people's anxiety about them, religious fundamentalist groups might grow.

Matthew Fox, a Dominican priest, spoke about 'creation spirituality', a new spirituality rooted in Christian mysticism and with a focus on nature-centred indigenous religions, as a theological response to ecological crisis. In 1989, Fox's theology was investigated by the then Cardinal Ratzinger – now Pope Benedict XV – and he was silenced from the Vatican for one year. In 1993, he was dismissed from his Dominican Order (Lynch 2007).

During the new Pope's first visit in Australia in 2008, he called on the world to combat global warming "with a life style that eases problems caused to the environment". The Vatican is also going green with a new solar system to cut greenhouse gases, even if Vatican City State is not a signatory of the Kyoto Protocol. The Holy See also announced in 2007 that it would become the world's first 'carbon neutral' sovereign state by planting trees in a national park in Hungary to offset the production of carbon-dioxide from Vatican City.

¹ Parts of this paper have been inspired by the already published piece of work: Possamai A. and Alpha Possamai-Inesedy (2007), Risk Society, Sustainable Development and Religion, in Roberto Blancarte Pimentel and Vassilis Saroglou (eds) Religion, Culture and Sustainable Development in Encyclopaedia of Life Support Systems (EOLSS), Developed under the Auspices of the UNESCO, Eolss Publishers, Oxford, UK.

These two examples are telling in the sense that they demonstrate that even one of the most institutionalised religion, is not static with regards to change in wider society. With the dangers discussed with the Risk Society thesis, religions are acting and reacting in various ways, and it is the point of this paper to illustrate two reactions. The first demonstrates that certain religions can be seen as islands of security to the growth of ontological insecurity, whereas the second response deals with groups that are reacting towards the 'bads' created in a risk society. There are ideal-types of (re)action cutting across and within religious groups towards the risk society.

Religions as islands of security

Norris and Inglehart (2004) claim that societies where people's everyday life is exposed to poverty, disease, and premature death will be more prone to being religious. Analysing the World Values Surveys, the authors raised as a hypothesis that

growing up in societies in which survival is uncertain is conducive to a strong emphasis on religion; conversely, experiencing high levels of existential security through one's formative years reduces the subjective importance of religion in people's lives (Norris and Inglehart 2004, 219).

According to their research, the more prone a society is to hazards, the more religious it will be. It is with this assumption that these authors justify why religion is growing in the south and why, the US case not being taken into account, it is decreasing in the north. Further, as the risk society thesis under study here is more about the social construction of risks rather than the risks themselves, we are left in the void when it comes to perception of risk and security, rather than the direct experience of hazards (Norris and Inglehart 2004, 239). It is thus the task of this paper to attempt to sketch some answers to these questions.

As people experience existential anxiety, it is not a surprise if many of them wish to re-affirm a threatened self-identity. Any collective identity that can offer a way out from this anxiety has the potential of attracting these individuals. Harskamp (2008) argues that as religions are attempts to eliminate angst, or systems to cope with it, the rise of existential insecurities (as created in the risk society) thus facilitate new religiosities. According to Kinnvall (2004, 742), nationalism and religion are two 'identity-signifiers' that are strong in providing this source of security in the risk society context because they 'convey a picture of security, stability, and simple answers'. If these levels of ontological insecurity increase, it is likely that the search for securitized subjectivity will also rise (Kinnvall 2004, 757).

Institutionalized religion often concurs with the nation as being territorially defined, as it refers to bounded entities such as churches, organizations, or political parties. In this form, religion, like nationalism, supplies existential answers to individual's quests for security by essentializing the product and providing a picture of totality, unity and wholeness. The fact that God has set the rules and made them difficult to contest relieves the individual psychologically from the responsibility of having to choose (Kinnvall 2004, 759).

Not only institutionalised religions are found to provide this source of security in this risk society, but new forms of religions such as the New Religious Movements (Dawson 2006; Possamai-Inesedy 2002) appear to provide some form of help as well.

It is important to note at this stage that the early theorists of risk society, Beck and Giddens, saw religion as withdrawing from the front stage of western societies and as having less importance in people's lives, however, it is the argument of this paper that religion is alive, and rather than disappearing, it is changing in adaptive and reactive ways. Religion is no longer part of the public sphere the way it used to be yesteryear. In western societies especially, it no longer provides a close-knitted system of beliefs united with, for example, a nation. Religion is now part of consumer culture. In this consumer culture, more and more people choose their religion (e.g. find a new group or decide to come back in the group they were socialised into during their youth) and make a decision about what belief system to follow. Some do not choose any religion, as the rise of atheism in western countries indicates, but others make a choice for their belief (see for more information Possamai 2005). However, while mainstream religions and inner-worldly new religious movements might offer parts of an island of security in the adversity of ontological insecurity, fundamentalism appears to be better equipped to offer a whole island of security. In this sense, there is a type of religious market available in which fundamentalism is situated. And it is the argument of this paper that in choosing a religion in terms of what it can offer to alleviate the ontological insecurity for those who join, fundamentalism appears to be the 'best product' on the market

Fundamentalism can be found in all religions and has different characteristics according to the faith where it is situated. In Christianity, for example, fundamentalism can be equated to Christian literalists who believe that the Bible contains the actual words of God and directly applies it entirely to contemporary life. People who join these fundamentalist groups tend to not find answers in mainstream churches and seek more 'engaged' forms of religions (e.g. certain forms of Pentecostalism) by looking for a stability of commitment in a community which would give a stronger sense of authority and a tighter system of beliefs and practices; that is, a more structured world/spiritual view. As Bauman (1998, 74) states:

On a world in which all ways of life are allowed, yet none is safe, they muster enough courage to tell those who are eager to listen what to decide so that the decision can remain safe and stand up in all courts that matter. In this respect, religious fundamentalism belongs to a wider family of totalitarian or proto-totalitarian offered to all those who find the burden of individual freedom excessive and unbearable.

According to Possamai-Inesedy (2002) this branch of fundamentalisms has a world rejecting adaptive reaction to risks. On the one hand, they acknowledge the declining status of the world in terms of environmental, social and political issues, and can express sentiments such 'of course I care, so I make sure to recycle', yet on the other hand, because of their emphasis on their eternal life, they do not see these issues as affecting them. As one respondent stated: 'those who have a personal relationship with God are protected from these issues, there are things that can't even touch us'. In a larger scale US survey of 614 participants, Slimak and Dietz (2006) found that Christians who believe in the literal meaning of religious texts are less concerned

about global risks than other groups from the research. In terms of ecological concerns, it appears that fundamentalism does not have high environmental concerns.

Thus, by belonging to certain religions, levels of anxiety can be lowered, however, it appears that religious fundamentalism is the type of religion that provides the biggest island of security for people looking to have less anxiety through religion. As fundamentalism is a growing phenomenon in both the south and north of the world, one could thus expect it to rise even stronger as anxiety grows, partly because of the 'bads' emerging from the risk society.

It is a fact that certain religious groups are creating an island of security to the ontological insecurity partly created out of the risk society, however, there are also other movements that are working on certain issues that are of concern to the risk society. The next section will only focus on environmental and sustainable development concerns.

Religions reacting against the 'bads' created by the Risk Society

Many writers on, and activists in, development have found that the Judeo-Christian writings about 'man's right to master the Earth' (Genesis 1:28) has been at the root of Western societies' attitude towards the earth. It has even been claimed by some environmental groups that these religious traditions are at the basis of the destruction of the natural environment through the promotion of a value system that proclaims man and woman's domination over nature (Mebratu, 1998). Further, it might be expected of certain religious groups that if they believe, for example, in the coming of the Apocalypse that nothing should, or is worth doing, to protect the environment as the world is about to end through divine intervention. However, while not diminishing these statements, the reality is more complex and religion can not be accused of only having an antagonistic approach to the environment and to reflexive development.

We could expect nature religions such as indigenous religions, some New Age networks, neo-paganism and witchcraft which believe that it is important of living in harmony with nature to be the only exception. There are, for example, some neo-pagan groups which are heavily engaged in social, political and spiritual actions to save and/or protect the environment. Our planet is even referred by some of these groups as Gaia, a living entity who cannot be dominated by humankind. However, certain groups within the Judeo-Christian traditions, often those pointed out as the 'culprit of earth destruction', are also working towards the protection of nature and thus promote a sustainable and reflexive development approach to the world. Although there has been limited connection between scriptural based religions and environmental movements, it appears that some of these mainstream religious groups are slowly working on an environmentally healthy society which could advance the sustainability agenda (Gardner 2003). An older example is the Genesis Farm, which was set up by a group of Dominican Sisters in New Jersey in the 1980s. This project saw the Earth as a 'primary revelation of the divine' where experiments on sustainable agriculture were conducted (Lynch 2007, 82). More recent examples are: protecting the environment as God's creation has now become an agenda for some Christian Democrats in the US (Rosin 2007) and for the Evangelical Environmental Network; a group of evangelical Christians who promote conservation and environmental stewardship (Gardner 2003).

Gordon Lynch (2007) makes reference to a new religious ideology which he simply calls ‘The New Spirituality’. This new spirituality has been around for some time and has been developing across and beyond a range of religious traditions. However, it is mainly in the 21st century that this ideology has crystallised into one that tends to be liberal or radical in theological terms (e.g. a willingness to revise religious tradition in the light of contemporary knowledge, to be sympathetic to feminist theology, and a belief that there is a truth inherent in all religious tradition) and/or green and left-of-centre in political terms (e.g. being concerned with issues of tolerance, diversity, environmentalism, social justices and civil rights). This ideology tries to reconnect religion with scientific knowledge, to be beneficial for women, and to respond to the impending ecological crisis. This ‘Progressive Spirituality’ is found across religions such as Christians, Jews, Muslims, Quakers, Pagans, ..., and sometimes these adherents to this new ideology find themselves more connected through this ideology across faiths than with believers who are of their own faith. This spirituality is carried by a cluster of networks and organisations with various levels of involvements. Contrary to New Age Movements which, according to Lynch, lacks any shared programme or has a strong sense of identification, some religious actors in ‘Progressive Spirituality’ can work on specific social programmes or political campaigns. This spirituality is seen by insiders as a type of spiritual ‘third way’ beyond the choices of conservative religion and secular liberalism.

Close to this ideology of this new spirituality, the Australian theologian, Norman Habel, Editor of The Earth Bible Project states in a radio interview:

I have an expression that I use frequently called ‘heavenism’. ‘Heavenism’ is for me, that belief that what’s really important is God in heaven, making, as it were, heaven our important home instead of Earth our home; viewing the Earth as disposable. In the end, the Earth is going to come to an end, that’s what we’ve thought, this is just matter, and so it doesn’t really matter what happens to it. I believe that we need a whole new orientation here, that has us recognise the Earth as a spiritual entity as much as it is a material entity. Something that is really a sacred site in this cosmos.

(<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/enc/stories/s74986.2htm> (23/02/2007))

This quote reflects the move within certain Christian groups from a view on ‘heavenism’ towards recognising the earth as much more than simply a material entity; that is as a spiritual entity as well. Following this change of approach towards the earth, a paradigm has emerged from these Judeo-Christian religious traditions which is called Ecotheology. In this paradigm, theologians reinterpret passages in classic texts to make sense of the current natural crisis as it is believed that we have forgotten about the wealth of ecological material found in these scriptures. The wealth of information is argued to have totally been missed by theologians in the past. These ecotheologians believe that if we allow our lives to be driven by religious virtues that take into account a respectful approach to nature, we may avoid moving deeper into the risk society dystopia. As Norm Habel continues in his radio interview:

Let me give one example of the problem we face, which is with apocalyptic, and the idea the world is going to come to an end. Therefore in the mind of many popular thinkers and preachers, the earth is disposable, it’s waste. It can be thrown into the waste, bang, it can be eternity. When in fact that kind of

understanding of earth and of creation, is simply not true to the Biblical text when you look at it very closely. If you look at the text at the end of Revelation, this grand and glorious picture of the new world, the new world is not a disposal of this world, it's a transformation, a renewal of this world.
(<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/enc/stories/s74986.2htm> (23/02/2007))

This paper briefly underlines that religion does not have to be antagonistic towards the environment and possible reflexive development. There are mainstream religious groups active at changing people's perception of the world and its environment. Through these actions, these religious groups are engaged in moderating the industrial abuses stemming from the advent of the risk society. There is also another type of ideal-type religiosity which offers an island of security to the anxieties partly created by the risk society. This paper only highlighted two ideal-types of religious (re)action towards to risk society and more research still needs to be conducted to analyse the possible sub-ideal-types of (re)action.

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