

## The Case for Emancipatory Ecospirituality

Clément Barniaudy et Damien Delorme

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Résumé de l'article

Scientific consensus on the environmental emergency has prompted recognition that business as usual is not only materially catastrophic but ethically, socially, and politically unfair. Working from different axiological perspectives, scholars in the environmental humanities have framed the crisis as an opportunity for paradigmatic and radical change, encouraging a new “Great Transformation” or “Great Transition”. Such appeals tend to focus on systemic change at economic and political levels. Nevertheless, the ecological crises as a revolutionary opportunity demands an integral metamorphosis of Western capitalist cultures, including the ontological and ethical dimensions embedded in perception, desires, and affects, and grounded in elementary subjective practices. In this light, ecospirituality is integral to transformative ecology. Confronted with the ecological crisis, this calls for us to set to work on the widely discussed issue of the relations between spirituality and politics.

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# The Case for Emancipatory Ecospirituality

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*Clément Barniaudy and Damien Delorme*

*We can't wait any longer to restore our relationship with the Earth because right now the Earth and everyone on Earth is in real danger. [...] A spiritual revolution is needed if we're going to confront the environmental challenges that face us.*

- Thich Nhat Hanh 2013, 28

## Introduction

Are ecological crises transforming the relationship between spirituality and politics? From the spiritual perspective, it is generally important to identify if the ecologization of spiritualities (meaning the integration of environmental concerns into spiritual traditions and practices) is a form of exogenous political instrumentalization. Or, does it represent an inauthentic transformation of traditions that took shape in a very distant context from that of the contemporary ecological crises, and perhaps even a distancing from ultimate religious ends which point to a transcendent dimension, sometimes located outside this world?<sup>1</sup> From the perspective of political ecology,<sup>2</sup> the worry is of a quite different order. Generally defined, “political ecology is a field within environmental studies focusing on power relations as well as the coproduction of nature and society” (Benjaminsen and Svarstad 2019). In such a project, the main normative issues are human and non-human well-being, respect for fundamental human rights, democratic organization, and environmental and social justice. Thus the debate about ecospirituality focuses more on political power or the powerlessness of ecospirituality. Is there not a tendency for ecospiritual responses to the ecological crises to depoliticize, individualize, irrationalize, and favour the adaptation of an unsustainable system rather than fostering the

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<sup>1</sup> For an expression of these worries in Buddhism, see for example (Harris 1991; 1995; 2000; Keown 2007; Falcombello 2017). Debate around the “authenticity” of ecospirituality has been the occasion for numerous responses have foregrounded the endogenous dimension of ecospiritual proposals (Ives 2017), the tradition of social and political engagement of certain religious actors, and the extent to which it is legitimate for traditions to renew themselves when confronted with unprecedented challenges within what one might call with Ricœur a “hermeneutics of cultures” (Pierron 2014).

<sup>2</sup> The French-speaking tradition anticipated in many respects the environmental humanities (notably by its transdisciplinarity and dimension of cultural critique) with great figures such as Guattari, Moscovici, Serres, Latour, Stengers, and other authors. What at least unifies these very diverse thoughts is the analysis of ecological crises as civilizational issues, that is to say cultural and therefore immediately political, but not only political. See (Whiteside 2002).

radical transformations required by the ecological emergency? Our paper belongs primarily to this second line of inquiry and aims to answer some of the objections to ecospirituality by some important figures of the political ecology movement.<sup>3</sup>

We start by defining how we understand ecospiritual practices from a pluralistic, multicultural, and multiconfessional perspective, and by questioning the sense in which ecospirituality, as a care practice of the ecological self, can be considered political. We then consider the main objections that are typically directed at ecospirituality from the perspective of various political ecologists, and respond by acknowledging that the politicization of ecospiritual practices can be polarized between both extremes (conservative and emancipatory). Ultimately the question is not “Is ecospirituality political or not?”, but rather “What are the *a priori* conditions of emancipatory ecospiritual practices?” We argue that one necessary, though insufficient, condition of emancipatory ecospirituality is explicit politicization into an emancipatory theological-political perspective.

## **1. Ecospiritual Practices as Ecology in the First-Person**

What is ecospirituality? Ecospirituality can be generally defined as the mutual cross-fertilization of ecology and spirituality. By “ecology” we mean not only the science of the interconnections of organisms within an environment, but, drawing on Guattari’s three ecologies (2008), the environmental, social, and mental dimensions of an experience “by the ‘milieu’”<sup>4</sup> (“*the medium/middle/environment*”) (Pignarre and Stengers 2011, 116). By “spirituality,” we understand a subjective experience that is transformative of personhood, interpreted as intensifying fundamental dimensions of existence (namely meaning, the essential, the sacred, the ultimate, etc.) and opens up to forms of transcendence. In a similar attempt to give a formal, transcultural and transconfessional definition, David McPherson states: “spirituality involves spiritual practices [...] that aim to direct and transform one’s life as a whole toward increasing spiritual fulfillment, i.e., toward a more meaningful life” (2017, I).

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<sup>3</sup> Our aim is not to criticize political ecology as such, which is a very diverse and contested field. Rather we aim to draw attention to the problematic misapplication of the theoretical framework of some political ecologists, in particular certain authors, given their lack of knowledge of ecospirituality.

<sup>4</sup> Stengers and Pignarre are explicitly inspired by Deleuze’s reflection on the “milieu” (middle/in between/environment) (Deleuze 2006a). But they develop the idea that “thinking ‘by the middle’” is a way to think relationally, in context, and not starting from principles or first reasons both “pragmatic and speculative” which precisely fits to Guattari’s ecosophy (2008). “A fine term, milieu, one which (for once) gives French the advantage over English, since it designates at the same time the stake that a milieu constitutes for every living being, and the stake for thought of escaping from the hold of first or final reasons, those that arm a majoritarian position” (Pignarre and Stengers 2011, 116).

One can approach ecospirituality through discourses. It thus appears historically as both “spiritualization” of ecological discourse and “ecologization” of spiritual discourse (Choné 2018). If one looks at types of religiosity, ecospirituality means an “eclectic bricolage” of “dark green [...] religious creativity” (Taylor 2010, 13-14). Thus, spiritualities in connection with nature can encompass such diverse contemporary phenomena as “radical environmentalism” or “surfing spirituality.” Their family resemblance stems from the fact that they “[flow] from a deep sense of belonging to and connectedness in nature, while perceiving the earth and its living systems to be sacred and interconnected” (Taylor 2010, 13).<sup>5</sup> We chose to approach ecospirituality through ecospiritual practices: first because we are interested in the relationship between transformative practices at a subjective level (ecology in the first person<sup>6</sup>) and the necessity for collective change (political ecology). Second, because we are aiming for a broad perspective on ecospirituality that may be pluralistic, but also multicultural and multiconfessional, in order to meet the contemporary cosmopolitical requisites facing the Anthropocene (and its thousand names).<sup>7</sup> And third, because we had personally experienced ecospiritual practices that are transformative and that have been the first push to disagree with a certain type of criticism of ecospirituality, coming from neo-Marxist political ecology.

By ecospiritual practices, we refer here to a set of practices or concrete exercises, which engage the practitioner in an interior transformation,<sup>8</sup> bringing to light new relations between their

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<sup>5</sup> Taylor suggests distinguishing four main types, depending on whether these currents belong to “Animism” or a “Gaian Earth Religion” (Taylor 2010, 14–15), but also whether they have a “supernatural” dimension or limit themselves to the “naturalist”. For example, Gary Snyder and Joanna Macy, both inspired by Zen or Tibetan Buddhism, respectively represent a “spiritual animism” and a “spiritual Gaian religion” (Taylor 2010, 17–22). Jane Goodall, Aldo Leopold, and James Lovelock represent a “naturalist spirituality” or a “naturalist Gaian religion” (Taylor 2010, 22–40).

<sup>6</sup> By first-person ecology, we situate ourselves in the lineage of a certain ecophenomenology (represented in France by Michel Bitbol, Gérald Hess, Jean-Philippe Pierron, and others), and we understand approaching ecological problems from subjective experiences, thus from a first-person situated experience. This can intersect with the currents of deep ecology, ecopsychology and environmental aesthetics, but also with more politicized perspectives, to which we feel closer personally, such as decolonial or ecofeminist approaches.

<sup>7</sup> The interesting thing about the concept of the Anthropocene is that it is immediately contested and contestable. At the geological level, scientists are still debating when and where to materialize the break with the Holocene. At the level of the Earth system sciences, the question of planetary limits, thresholds, and potential runaway effects are also being discussed. The social sciences are questioning the way in which this concept calls for overcoming the nature/culture dualism and proposes narratives to interpret our time a proliferation of alternative proposals (such as the Capitalocene, the Plantationocene, the Thermocene, the Androcene, etc.) emerging (Bonneuil, Gemenne, and Hamilton 2015).

<sup>8</sup> This choice to understand ecospirituality from concrete practices or exercises finds important resonances in the thinking of Pierre Hadot and his notion of “spiritual exercises” (1995). In the philosophical traditions of Greco-Roman antiquity, Hadot identifies very concrete exercises (reading, meditation, contemplation, writing, dialogues) aimed at a metamorphosis of subjectivity towards wisdom, characterized by three essential aspects: inner freedom, peace of

body-mind and the terrestrial home (*oikos*). We will be examining ecospiritual practices mainly as they are expressed in modern Western societies, where there is de facto a great deal of circulation, hybridization, and cross-fertilization of various traditions. Looking at ecospiritual practices, we can distinguish three sources that constitute the streams of ecospirituality:

(1) *The ecologization of traditional spiritual practices*. This is a global movement that can be seen in most religious traditions, facing environmental crises and reinterpreting its own resources to take care of these fundamental issues for human collectives. For example, the World Council of Church promotes a “Season for Creation” which usually takes place in autumn, and their site lists a whole set of prayers, readings, liturgies, blessings, in all the sensibilities of Christianity.<sup>9</sup> For Catholicism, it is the praise and tradition of the psalms that have been revived following the impulse of Pope Francis, notably in the *Laudato si* (2015).<sup>10</sup> Another great example is the monk, poet, and peace activist, Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-2022)<sup>11</sup> who developed a whole set of micropractices and poetization of elementary actions (breathing, sitting, eating, touching the earth, etc.) with magnificent depth to “ecologize” Zen Buddhism (Barniaudy and Delorme 2022).

(2) *The spiritualization of naturalist practices*. A second source of ecospirituality is the spiritualization of naturalist practices. This is the frequenting of natural environments, paying attention to their dynamics and their inhabitants, plus the development of naturalist knowledge which leads to a transformation of sensitivity. One finds a tendency to interpret the natural world as something that opens either onto a dimension of mystery or, which is explicitly transcendental, which in both cases fundamentally questions one’s sense of existence as a human, living among the living. A famous precursor is Jean-Jacques Rousseau, especially in his *Reveries of The Solitary*

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soul and cosmic awareness (i.e., the realization of belonging to the human and cosmic whole, a kind of dilation or transfiguration of the self). He chooses to call these exercises “spiritual” to imply that they are not limited to intellectual, moral, ethical or psychic dimensions, but also involve imagination, sensibility and all the faculties of the body-mind, and lead to a conversion, a new vision of the world and one’s place in it. Michel Foucault (2005) has been lecturing for an entire year at the Collège de France from a very similar perspective, choosing to describe these spiritual exercises as “practices of self-care”.

<sup>9</sup> “Season of Creation Resources,” Season of Creation, Laudato Si’ Movement, 2021, <https://seasonofcreation.org/resources/>.

<sup>10</sup> The psalm tradition is one of the poetic traditions of the Bible that includes praise for the beauty of the world. The title itself refers to this psalm tradition, in particular *Psalms* 148, as Francis explains in §72 (pp. 53-54). In this spirit, Francis ends his encyclical with two new prayers: “a prayer for our Earth” (p. 178) and “a Christian prayer in union with creation” (p. 179), which emphasize attitudes of adoration, gratitude, and reconciliation.

<sup>11</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh is a teacher and Buddhist monk of Vietnamese origin born in 1926. He notably puts forward the need for “engaged Buddhism” and for global ethics capable of responding to the problems of today. Two of his recent works explicitly address these ecological issues: *The World we have* (2008), and *Love Letter to the Earth* (2013). More recently, Sister True Dedication and a few other monks from Plum Village edited the book *Zen and the art of saving the planet* (2021) which is a selection of Thich Nhat Hanh’s writings, talks, interviews and question-and-answer sessions on deep ecology, engaged action, community-building and collective awareness.

*Walker* ([1782] 1976): “Placed in a calm retreat, meditation, the study of Nature, the contemplation of the universe, incessantly carries the thoughts of a recluse, towards the Author of all these objects, prompting him to search with pleasing inquietude the final destination of what he sees, and the source of his feelings.”

Rousseau deploys a whole vocabulary of meditation, contemplation, and ecstasy, interpreted in a form of theism, which explicitly weaves together the deepening of the experience of nature and spiritual interpretations. However, we could find this movement in many authors (i.e., Thoreau, Muir, Leopold, Carlson, etc.) who, starting from a naturalist practice, open, if not always explicitly towards a mysticism of nature, at least towards spiritual considerations.

(3) The third source of ecospirituality is *poïetics and the poetics of the ecological self* (which could include certain artistic practices or the poetics of the everyday). By “ecological self,” we understand, following Arne Næss (2005), an opening of subjectivity to the ecological relations which intrinsically constitute it. By “poïetics,” we mean a creative process, or an exploration of potentialities for metamorphosis, in this case of a self-incorporated into dynamic relations with other lifeforms and the world. The “poetics” overlaps with aesthetic experience understood in a broad sense (Hess 2017). This indicates resistance to the one-dimensionality of economic and technical rationality and opens up to the sensitive interpretation of our life in the world. All the practices that develop the ecological self, notably through aesthetic or poetic experiences, are in our sense ecospiritual, because they call for a deepening, an intensification, and an interpretation of something essential to our terrestrial condition.

In fact, this “poïetics of the ecological self,” which appears more directly in the third source, seems to be an underlying formal structure of any ecospiritual experience. Ecospiritual practices, though they imply entering into relation with a dimension of profundity and mystery situated beyond conceptual grasp (Egger 2018, 12), are embodied in a sentient experience of the world and not however in any way “ethereal”. They are a lived daily experience that we share with the totality of the living, “the mystery of being a body, a body that interprets and lives its life” (Morizot 2020, 22). Exploring this mystery becomes “spiritual practice” from the point at which attention is consciously turned towards the discovery of what phenomenology calls an “ecology in the first person”;<sup>12</sup> this type of ecology calls for renewed understanding of our relation to the Earth based on an experiential and relational process: “Ecology in the first person does not

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<sup>12</sup> Following Husserl's distinction between the “noetic” and the “noematic” and more generally between the “phenomenon” and the “object” allows us to distinguish different perspectives of reality in particular the “first person” experience, from the construction of scientific objectivity as a “third person” experience. It seems that this distinction comes from the reflections of French philosopher, Michel Bitbol who, following the “neuro-phenomenology” of Maturana and Varela, mobilized it to distinguish neuro-cognitive approaches to thought from lived approaches, notably mindfulness (Bitbol 2016; 2019). For a systematic approach to first-person ecology, see Hess, 2023.

describe functional relations that are visible and quantifiable, as in indices of biodiversity management, but invisible relations. It is not seen in objectification, but lived. It belongs not to an objectified cartography, but, fragile and sentient, to a lived inter-relation” (Pierron 2021, 38-9).

In carrying out this metabolization – i.e., integrating subjective transformation at a deep embodied level – of our ecological condition, through religious, naturalist, or aesthetic experiences, ecospiritual practices are an essential dimension of the “ecology in the first person”. They cultivate, explore, expand, and take care of the potentialities of the ecological self.

If the poïetics of the ecological self is a formal structure of ecospiritual practices, then the relationships of these practices with politics can be clarified. By “politics” we mean, following Latour (2004), not only governments and strategies for holding and exercising power, but also the “compositionist” processes and norms that organize collectives and “living together,” including human and nonhuman actors.<sup>13</sup> To question the political dimensions of ecospiritual practices means considering how they participate in the political game (from grassroots struggles to international institutions, including democratic, institutional, and representative issues). But also, how they contribute to building a specific political collective or community, connected to a territory, which will be in charge of the composition and organisation of living together (Latour 2010; 2017; 2018)? More specifically, our perspective linking ecology in the first person and political ecology, will focus on the relationship between the ecological self and the civil or political self. Here we follow a Foucauldian path; that is, a perspective that allows us to redefine the relationship between politics and ethics. Michel Foucault’s works have investigated with great relevance the way in which the devices, the discourses and the knowledge proper to certain institutions (State, Church...), and embedded in certain environments (Hospital, Prison, School...), contributed to shaping the subjectivities of the Moderns. That is, by imposing normative systems on the very bodies of individuals (biopolitics). The last years of his course at the *Collège de France* explored even more closely what allows the subject to emancipate itself from these individuating matrices.

In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (2005), Foucault evokes the practices of “Self-Care” (*epimeleia heautou* in Greek, *cura sui* in Latin), developed within ancient Greco-Roman culture. These practices or exercises, which allow the subject to heal itself, to arm itself in the face of life's events and to access a certain truth by transforming itself, are also what make possible the exercise of citizenship, of concern for others. They are therefore particularly recommended to all those who play an important role in the life of the city. In fact, Foucault shows that in ancient culture,

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<sup>13</sup> There are various and contested strategies for integrating non-human animals, more or less directly, into the political arena of rights or citizenship (see Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011, Pelluchon 2020). But this debate is not the key to our argument here.

concern for oneself and concern for others were inseparable. In a more modern context, Foucault insists that these techniques of the Self have an important emancipatory potential to short-circuit the logics of domination, by doubling them with a relation to the self (1982). They form the basis of what Deleuze, inspired by Foucault, would call micro-political practices that resist the normative processes of a certain power (2006b). The practices of the self cannot be reduced to an individual or community dimension but always involve relational and transversal components. This theme is revisited in *The Government of Self and Others* (2010) where Foucault questions the structuring elements of a relation to the Self, capable of generating political commitment, adhesion or action, through the concept of *parrêsia*. Understood as the free exercise of speech, *parrêsia* is rooted in a dimension of politics (*dunasteia*) understood as an “experience” rather than as a rule for organizing multiplicities; this experience allows us to try to understand what political engagement requires in terms of constructing the subject of a relation to the self.

Just as feminists have claimed that “the personal is political” (Heberle 2016), we might ask: is the intimacy of the ecological self (religiously, naturalistically, or poetically explored and cultivated in ecospiritual practices) penetrated with political norms and conflicts? Could it correlatively be the site of politicized claims, which would be all the more radical given that they touch on the profound affective roots of ethical and political commitments, such as behaviours and lifestyles? How then can ecospiritual practices contribute to the constitution of a new “ecological class” (Latour and Schultz 2022) and even, potentially, to ecosocial emancipatory struggles?

## **2. Ecospirituality and the Challenge of Politicization**

Without claiming to detail the variety of approaches and criticisms arising from political ecology, we will summarize some of the main criticisms levelled at ecospirituality from a political point of view, in order to draw out the *a priori* conditions of emancipatory ecospirituality. The idea that the ecospiritual is political immediately comes into conflict with a major tendency of (mainly Marxist and in a sense modernist) political ecology, which disqualifies ecospirituality as a vector of depoliticization and conservatism. Let us say a few words about these two main strands of criticism.

### **2.1. Individualist and Depoliticizing Withdrawal**

A first set of arguments consists in criticizing an allegedly individualist and depoliticizing withdrawal, which would favour the subjective acceptance of a catastrophic situation rather than the mobilization of social powers of insurrection and subversion.

We find such a critique notably in Bookchin’s analyses of so-called “mystical ecology” (1990, 34–35). The bias against spiritual dimensions reflects the fear of seeing the development, within alternative, anarchist, and ecological movements, of tendencies that one could qualify as anti-



modern. The latter would consist notably in: (1) prolonging, and settling simply to invert, dualist conceptions of the relation between nature and society, (2) neutralizing the collective springs of the emancipatory revolution by favouring personal adaptation to a problematic situation, and as a consequence (3) neglecting the social and political dimension of the ecological crises and the solutions to be put into effect.

The denunciation of “mystical ecology” belongs in the case of Bookchin to a specific interpretation of Marxist and anarchist tradition characterized by suspicion with respect to religious domination, which tends, without denying all relevance to the spiritual in the name of materialism, at least to reduce its legitimacy to certain moral and aesthetic dimensions. In this respect, a clarification provided by Bookchin in an article entitled “What is Social Ecology?” is eloquent:

Some critics have recently questioned whether social ecology has treated the issue of spirituality in ecological politics adequately, but social ecology was in fact among the earliest of contemporary ecologies to call for a sweeping change in existing spiritual values. [...] In social ecology a truly “natural” spirituality would center on the ability of an awakened humanity to function as moral agents for diminishing needless suffering, engaging in ecological restoration, and fostering an aesthetic appreciation of natural evolution in all its fecundity and diversity. (Bookchin 1993, 463)<sup>14</sup>

This Marx-inspired critique draws on the infamous metaphor “religion as the opium of the people” (Marx [1844] 1977, 64). Ecospirituality would thus aim to anaesthetize the suffering of the oppressed creature rather than to inspire it to revolt. It would avoid envisaging the transformation of power relations and especially modes of production and be a “palliative” for political institutions seeking to reduce inequalities and compensate for injustices. In this sense, it would favour “flight” from reality making it possible to bear the suffering produced by the material conditions of capitalism, particularly for the oppressed<sup>15</sup>.

Ecospirituality, especially given that it mobilizes practices that have been claimed by a capitalistic form of personal development, may elicit analogous suspicion. Like managers who incite individuals faced with oppression and stress to meditate so that they may adapt to the situation, rather than act collectively to change it, ecospirituality is thought to be a depoliticizing ruse, easily adopted by those in power. Inasmuch as it is compatible with commodification and because it

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<sup>14</sup> For an in-depth approach to the link between Bookchin's thinking on social ecology and deep ecology, see Wirth 2021.

<sup>15</sup> As mentioned by an anonymous reviewer, “it is worth noting that some scholars grounded in Marxian/Gramscian frameworks take a more complex view of religions and spiritualities than presented here” (e.g., Betto and Löwy 2010, Löwy 1995; 2021). Moreover, liberation theology in general demonstrates that a Marxist conceptual framework is not incompatible with religious commitment (Rowland 2007).

ultimately favours the status quo at the institutional level, it seems to belong to the category of defence strategies that consist of fleeing reality through practices that procure a form of personal comfort without sufficient perspective for social and political reflection. “Mystical ecology” (Elkin 1989) or deep ecology’s “deluge of [...] cosmic Eco la la” castigated by Heller and Bookchin (Bookchin 1987) could appear as such. Because it puts the accent on individual well-being and a “mystified, system-theoretical version of sociobiology” (Elkins 1989) rather than social analysis at the economic and political level, mystical ecology “reveals anti-emancipative implications” and may even “pave the way for authoritarian strategies to solve social problems” (Elkins 1989). Ecospirituality is thus, in this sense, a spiritualization of domination and it places the agents outside the conditions of political action that lie at the centre of the functioning of democratic societies (Elkins 1989; Biehl 1991; Charbonnier 2019). It therefore favours an individualist and depoliticized withdrawal, the effects of which are derisory, given the stakes at play, and even dangerous to the extent that they divert attention away from the necessity for radical and revolutionary changes to civilizational paradigms.

We might also recognize that, historically and in several cultural spheres and traditions, spirituality has been able to nourish apolitical tendencies. For instance, in the broad spectrum of Christian (and other) traditions, eremitic movements and monasticism that advocate solitude, withdrawal or even contempt for the world (*contemptus mundi*) (Constable 2017). Likewise prophetic criticisms of worldly agitations in the name of a transcendent ideal; or the idea that spirituality is a quest for the essential, the authentic and the meaningful that replaces the superficial appearance and absurdity of social games (Woods and Tyler 2012). On the contrary, political realism, the need for collective mobilization to fight against oppressive power relations and promote justice, are an invitation to be wary of disengagement from the world, in particular spiritual disengagement, and to assume different types of political actions.<sup>16</sup>

## **2.2 Irrationalism with Fascist and Conservative Tendencies**

A second set of arguments made against ecospirituality comes from a modern rationalist perspective, which tends to identify Earth-based spiritualities as exemplary instances of irrationalist approaches to ecological issues that favour sectarian, reactionary or even ecofascist politics. There are two main ideas that underpin this critique: on the one hand, the mobilization of obscurantist beliefs and affects derives from a form of romantic irrationality like that which was exploited by the Nazis for political gain, and which crops up again in the reactionary and anti-democratic political theorizations of the present. On the other hand, reference to a transcendent domain is worming its way into political normativity. This is also said to be typical of the

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<sup>16</sup> On the complex relationships between spirituality and politics within Christianity, see (Mazzocco, Waterlot, and Trémolières 2018).

reactionary and hierarchical tendencies thought to be opposed to the elementary demands of a pluralist democratic space, and, more generally, to the “progressive” or “revolutionary” movements which place the fight against oppression and the requirement for justice at the heart of their political demands. In the French-speaking context, the fear of an “authoritarian ecologism” nourished by Earth-based spiritualities reflects the criticisms made by so-called rationalist and progressive modernity (Ferry 1992; Sternhell 1995). Concern for the potentially fascist tendencies of ecology is also seen in neo-Marxist or anarchist critiques of certain popular figures of spiritual ecology (i.e., Pierre Rabhi) or of Catholic conservative “integral ecology” on the grounds of reactionary links and the depoliticization of ecology (Malet 2018; Guillibert 2020; Dubiau 2022).

Here again we must recognize that ecospirituality is not immune to sectarian drifts (Damgé 2021), or conservative (or even ecofascist) claims and revivals (Forchtner 2020; Moore 2022),<sup>17</sup> which might flourish in a naive relationship to belief, failing to adopt critical distance with respect to obscurantist epistemological tendencies.<sup>18</sup> Yet these alienating tendencies of ecospirituality are opposed to any emancipatory political project, by reconducting oppressions, under the cover of a quest for the essential, and by producing epistemological and political dispositions opposed to the elementary principles of a democratic, egalitarian, and just political project.

In sum, the criticisms of spiritual ecology coming from currents of political ecology that can be labelled as ecosocialist, anarchist, neo-Marxist or modern rationalist, make it possible to clearly distinguish two pitfalls that seriously threaten the project of emancipatory ecospirituality. The first is the potentially apolitical tendencies of spiritual practices, the second is the potentially alienating tendencies at the intersection between obscurantist epistemological drifts (irrationalism, conspiracism, ...) and anti-democratic political drifts (authoritarianism, ecofascism, ...).

### **2.3. How Can we Respond to Such Critical Arguments?**

Let us first make it clear that we do not deny that some expressions of ecospiritual practices or claims do show alienating forms of politicization. We strongly oppose them. Nevertheless, we also recognize that ecospirituality is politicized in very diverse, contested, and polarized ways. So, while we agree to recognize the potentially oppressive and reactionary appropriation of ecospiritual practices, we refuse to see them as necessary consequences of ecospirituality conceived homogeneously (and in our sense abusively) as a whole. This is especially true if we

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<sup>17</sup> On the links between nature spiritualities and the far right in the French context, see (Carle 2017; François 2018; Benoist 2020; d’Allens 2022)

<sup>18</sup> See the emerging concept “conspirituality” (Ward 2011) which describes relationships between New Age spirituality and *conspiracy* theories, and its resurgences in the COVID-19 context (Parmigiani 2021; Griera 2022; Halafoff 2022)

pay attention to a detailed description of transformative practices (Barniaudy and Delorme 2022) and we can argue that, at a logical level, ecospirituality is a potential vector of more awareness of, and involvement with, the political dimensions of our current situation.

The argument is the following: if there is, within most spiritual traditions, a tension between “withdrawal” from and “engagement” in the world, the ecospiritual practices we refer to set themselves apart by their attention to psycho-corporal experiences and relational interdependencies, which make it intrinsically improbable that they would forget the world or hold politics in contempt. Ecological crises brutally underline the dysfunction of capitalist, extractivist, productivist, and consumerist thermo-industrial global cultures. We are reminded of the world through the power and unpredictability of its reactions. Ecospirituality aims to deepen our relationship to the corporeity or material networks that make up our worldly existence. It thus has the potential to make us, not less but more aware of the political conditions of production, appropriation, and exploitation which structure the power relations and injustices present within these networks of interdependence. Ecospirituality is thus not an escape from the world, but rather a deep commitment to a better understanding of the interdependent links that constitute our existence in the world. In that sense, ecospirituality potentially aligns with Latour's project of composing a new emancipatory political attractor, the “Terrestrial” – opposed to both “Global” and “Reactionary Modernization”. This involves going back to descriptions of vital bonds and attachments, starting from very local issues, and metabolizing those attachments to compose alliances and designate enemies (Latour 2018; 2021). Therefore, there is no logical necessity between ecospirituality and depoliticization. On the contrary, there are good analytical reasons to conceive ecospiritual practices as potential resources for a more politicized understanding of our ecological situation.

Secondly, there is no intrinsic break between ecospirituality and the conditions of collective action, struggles or other political involvement. Indeed, not only do ecospiritual practices bring, not less but more attention to relational and systemic dynamics, but collective actions toward environmental transitions may desperately need subjective, transformative practices to care about our ecological self and requirements for effective cooperation. We could then reverse the burden of proof and ask, “How, in the face of ecological crises, can we imagine political action without consciousness, resources and subjective transformations of an ecospiritual type?” instead of “How can one be ecospiritual and politically committed?”. In that sense, we can *a priori* imagine that ecospiritual practices might not be obstacles but rather conditions for the effective political action facing our current crises.

Thirdly, there is no necessary relation between ecospirituality and ecofascism or more broadly authoritarian and alienating politicization. We can see that the objections that stir up fear of the promotion of fascism and conservatism by ecospirituality ultimately derive from the sophism

of the slippery slope, which infers from certain potential tendencies a rejection on grounds of principle. To defuse these fears, we can answer that, at the logical level, nothing indicates that the link between ecospirituality and fascist and reactionary positioning is in any way a necessity, or even has any causality. At most, we can observe doubtful correlations on discourses. Then, at the political level, proponents of ecospirituality are usually in minority positions; they are not able to impose a reactionary order (even if some of them can fuel minority reactionary currents). Moreover, at the axiological level (i.e., concerning the *a priori* values recognized as religious phenomena in the political sphere), it seems to us necessary to go beyond the perceived dualism between theological-political conservatism and the revolutionary progressiveness of secularized ethical-political normativity. For us, it is more productive to evaluate ecospiritual politicizations according to whether they choose oppressive religiosity (in the service of the hegemonic powers) or instead emancipatory religiosity<sup>19</sup> (in the service of the struggles for ecological and social justice).

In sum, if those reasons are correct (meaning if there is no necessity between ecospirituality and depoliticization; no necessity between ecospirituality and retreat from collective, political, efficient actions; no necessity between ecospiritual practices and alienating politicization), then we can ask: What would be the *a priori* conditions for emancipatory politicization of ecospiritual practices that would nourish political and collective action towards more sustainable lifestyles and institutions?

Our idea is that, if the pitfalls mentioned above are real risks (depoliticization and/or alienation), then, a first necessary, though not sufficient, condition would be explicit politicization aligned with emancipatory concerns and struggles. That means, first on the political level, at least one of the following criteria: concerns for the poor and (eco)justice issues; analyses in terms of balance of powers and “arts of governing” criticizing various oppressions; alignment with the intersectional justice movements (i.e., indigenous, ecofeminist, decolonial, anti-extractivist (Riofrancos 2020), etc.); or commitment to pluralism. This type of alliance between political commitment and ecospiritual practices would allow practitioners to recognize that their quest for care should not prevent them from also having political awareness of the situation. It would also explicitly prevent and condemn antidemocratic or oppressive politicization, by clarifying political positions within the contested field of how to compose fair conditions for living together on a limited Earth.

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<sup>19</sup> Religiosity is used here in a broader sense than spirituality: it includes beliefs, rites, institutions, and imaginaries that are part of religion, as a cultural fact, in a broad sense. On the much-disputed subject of the conflicted relationships between religion and spirituality, we therefore tend to take a non-dualistic position, allowing for overlaps and distinctions to be made in context. We would agree, for instance, to characterize ecospirituality as being religious without religion (Pierron 2014; 2016)

But if the ecospiritual realm is political, it also means that this emancipation quest must clarify its position at a politico-theological level. Here, we would argue that, to prevent the devastating alliance of religious attitudes and violent, authoritarian, or oppressive political powers, we would require a commitment to what political theology has called the “prophetic” dimension of religious and spiritual traditions (criticizing the injustices and vanity of worldly powers). As exemplified in liberation theology movements (Rowland 2007; Martínez Andrade 2016), this means a radical criticism of the alignment of religious and spiritual movements in the service of unjust hegemonic politics and political powers. This also means that the dimension of transcendence recognized within the ecospiritual experience should essentially play a role of never exceeding the external principle of contestation and criticism of worldly normative orders, and never any role of authority that could potentially reinforce worldly powers.<sup>20</sup>

### **Conclusion as Pragmatic Opening: Potential Benefits**

We have adopted a broad pluralist multicultural approach to ecospirituality through our triple definition of ecospiritual practices (ecologization of spiritual practices, spiritualization of naturalist practices, poetics and poietics of the ecological self). We then set out the two main criticisms of ecospirituality: depoliticization and alienation. We recognized that these are real risks but not an intrinsic failure of ecospiritual practices per se. If we are to avoid these pitfalls, there are two a priori conditions for an emancipatory ecospirituality: (1) an explicit politicization aligned with emancipatory concerns and struggles, and (2) an explicit commitment to a kind of prophetic attitude criticizing the injustices and vanity of worldly powers.

To conclude in the form of an overture, we would like to examine some of the expected benefits of integrating these emancipatory ecospiritual practices into the political challenge of collectively transforming our cultures and societies in the face of global environmental crises. According to us, the main effect would be to contribute to transforming subjectivities that are disconnected from their environment into an ecological self. This has multiple ontological, ethical and political implications and opens up an immense field of reflection.<sup>21</sup> Without pretending to be exhaustive, we would like to outline here some elements concerning the three dimensions of these implications.

First, this would make it possible to resolve certain dissonances that exist in our societies between the calls for a “Great Turning” (Macy and Brown 2014), conversion or ecological

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<sup>20</sup> This corresponds to the dimension of “open” religiosity, in the sense of the distinction between “the closed and the open” theorized by Bergson in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1935). Cf. its contemporary revivals for thinking about political and religious phenomena (Riquier and Worms 2018).

<sup>21</sup> For example, in the field of environmental education, see (Barniaudy 2023, Delorme 2023).

transition, and the obstacles remaining within a dominant ontology referred to as “naturalistic” by Descola (2013).<sup>22</sup> And which, in turn, is intertwined with colonial, extractivist, capitalistic, and patriarchal modernity: the logic of discrimination, dualistic hierarchies, oppressive naturalizations, atomistic individualism, teleological historical pretension, etc. Transformations at the base of consciousness, such as those proposed by emancipatory ecospiritual practices, are thus perhaps necessary (though not sufficient) so that calls for the “Great Turning” do not remain pious wishes, announcements without action, or doomed to failure. Instead, they may be seen as a fundamental attuning of ecological subjectivities with terrestrial ecological concerns. This type of relational ontology, Arturo Escobar shows, is deeply political because it is a way to decolonize subjectivities, and to resist capitalist forces (2020, 43):

For us, the urban-moderns living in the spaces most strongly marked by the liberal model of life (the ontology of the individual, the market), relationality presents a major challenge, given how much personal inner work it takes to unlearn the civilizations of disconnection, economism, science, and the individual. Perhaps it means abandoning the individual idea that we have of radical political practice. How can we take the inspiration of relationality seriously? How can we relearn interexisting with all humans and nonhumans? Should we regain some familiarity with the Earth to relearn the art of *sentipensar* with it?

The political struggle must go as far as and probably begin with a critical deconstruction of the oppressive modes of subjectivation inherited from capitalist, extractivist, colonial, and patriarchal modernity.

Second, ecospirituality, as the practice of cultivating the ecological self, might help bring into democratic deliberations the care for ecological relationships that constitute our community of living. For sure, this integration of ecological relationships into citizenship would not fit into the partition of naturalist society (in Descola’s sense) excluding non-human actors. But if one requisite of our current situation is to go beyond this naturalistic dualism, then ecospirituality could be paramount for nourishing post-naturalistic subjectivity that tries to bring those dimensions into the democratic and rational sphere of Western democratic institutional organization. Proposals for institutional changes such as a “Parliament of Things” (Latour 2004),<sup>23</sup> or Serres’s “WAFEL” (for *Water, Air, Fire, Earth and Livings*), a literally planetary institution (Serres 2012), would then appear not simply utopian. They could be relevant for broadening the

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<sup>22</sup> Descola calls the ontology of the modern Western cultures “naturalism” because it is based on “nature” as a metaphysical operator that organizes the dualistic separation between humans and non-humans.

<sup>23</sup> Latour’s provocation to imagine a non-modern form of representation for democratic states to cope with climate change and other environmental challenges has inspired several interesting experimental projects. See (Toledo 2021; “Parliament of Things” n.d.)

instituting forces of society toward non-dualistic, post-naturalist imaginaries.<sup>24</sup>

A third political-historical effect would be to reweave the religious and political spheres, beyond the modern supersessionist secular narrative (which assumes that rationality would replace belief and that sciences would supplant religions). Promoting emancipatory ecospirituality would also pave the way for theological-political potentialities other than the historically hegemonic religious tendency to be the servant of political powers. This type of reweaving would help reconsider secularization as a way of pluralizing religious expressions<sup>25</sup> that are compatible with the requirements of democratic organizations.<sup>26</sup> As shown by Latour, this reintegration of explicitly religious reality within the political sphere would help engage compositionist and diplomatic discussion at a planetary level with cultures that have not followed the occidental path of secularization (2017). Here, we can also outline that the connection between non-naturalistic cosmovisions, including “earth spiritualities” (Eisenstein 2019), and “ecological distribution conflicts” (Martinez-Alier 2021) is at the heart of Indigenous struggles to protect their land and culture against neocolonial extractivism (Betto and Löwy 2010; Apffel-Marglin 2011; Whyte 2018). Recognizing this link between spirituality and political ecology could thus contribute to a more robust recognition of these struggles in mainstream politics.

Emancipatory ecospirituality is thus a way of renewing the practices and landmarks of political struggles. It may contribute to combining care and struggle, individualizing empowerment, and the construction of collectives effectively engaged in the ecological transformation of ways of life [modes de vie] and of ways of governing that emanate from them.

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<sup>24</sup> Another political framework that could be favored by ecospiritual promotion of the ecological self might be initiatives trying to link together environmental, social and human health issues in a new “planetary health” narrative. See Acunzo et al. 2018.

<sup>25</sup> As authors such as Charles Taylor have elaborated (see Taylor 2022).

<sup>26</sup> That could include: recognition and warranty of human rights and basic liberties, pluralism, or collective decision-making procedures regulated by a public use of reason if we adopt an Habermasian perspective on deliberative democracy (Habermas 2008; Portier 2011).



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