

## Article

# Ecospirituality in French-Speaking Europe: Linking Ecological Thought with Alternative Spirituality

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**Abstract:** Contemporary ecospirituality is built on a double articulation between ecology (science) and spirituality (religion) and can be intertwined with practices and beliefs stemming from neopaganism and, more broadly, an animist vision. The study presented here is anchored in social anthropology, which adds an important empirical dimension that is often underrepresented within the contemporary debates of ecospirituality and the philosophical approaches to science and religion. I therefore propose to begin by describing the methodology I am using. Then, I will outline the sociological (and historical) roots of ecospirituality. Thirdly, I will present the main different currents that make up ecospirituality. Finally, I will end this article by exposing the different types of knowledge produced by ecospiritual actors, reconciling intuitive knowledge and rational knowledge.

**Keywords:** ecospirituality; ecology; alternative spirituality; nature; new animism; ecocentrism

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Contribution

My contribution to the present “Religion, Science and Technology in Pantheism, Animism and Paganism” issue is relevant for two things. First, ecospirituality is built on the double articulation between environmentalism (as a social and political movement for the protection and preservation of the natural environment and the promotion of sustainable practices, based on an ecological [the scientific discipline] perspective) and spirituality (as a contemporary form of religion relying on personal and subjective experience rather than institutional authority). Second, it is constituted by some practices and beliefs stemming from neopaganism and, more broadly, an animist vision. I will come back to these dimensions later. Moreover, my disciplinary anchorage in social anthropology allows me to add to the debate initiated by the editors an empirical dimension that is not always found within the philosophy of religion. Let us begin this paper by reminding what the theory of secularizing is and how it contributes to the long-standing discussion in the sociology of religion regarding science-and-religion.

### 1.2. The Theory of Secularization

The possibility of a cohabitation between “science” and “religion”<sup>1</sup> has long been debated in our Western societies. If, in a bygone era, religion dominated the public sphere by intermingling with politics, the process of secularization that accompanied modernity has reversed the trend to the point of speaking of the “disenchantment of the world” (Gauchet 1985). Indeed, the improvement of living conditions and the apparent success of the ideology of progress in our societies has thus encouraged the idea that there would be a gradual but certain disappearance of traditional religion in favor of a more rational and scientific worldview. The theory of secularization, which has gained consensus among the community of researchers in the religious studies, has nevertheless been undermined by the “return of religion” to the point of provoking an unprecedented mea culpa on the part of most of its fervent defenders (Berger 1999). Sociologists of religion have thus had to revise their analytical grids and reconsider the place of religion in modernity: instead of



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disappearing in favor of more secular visions, religion is reinventing itself in an increasingly globalized world. This is what the French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2003) has called “multiple religious modernities”.

In Europe, the major surveys of values conducted at the end of the 20th century by the French researcher Yves Lambert (2004) have identified three main trends: a continuing exit from religion, an internal reappropriation among Christians and the development of a religiosity “without belonging” (Davie 1994), based on the logic of individualization and subjectivization (Garnoussi 2007). In fact, according to the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (1992), from the second half of the 20th century we have entered a culture of choice, where each person is able to shape his or her own way of life according to his or her own subjectivity, experience and, therefore, individuality (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). From then on, personal experience becomes the ultimate authority determining whether something is right, true or not and tends to replace the authority of the institution (be it religious, political, familial, etc.)—at least, theoretically. The autonomous individual—the true culmination of the modern project—now has the privilege of choosing who he or she wishes to become and of composing his or her own system of meaning.

From this ethics of authenticity emerges a new religious model (which we call “spirituality”, which I will come back to later) which matches the development of consumerism (Gauthier 2020); it is strongly personalized and at a distance from any religious institution. It also presents other innovative characteristics such as a bringing closer the divine into the human and a strong interest for this worldly realm of existence (immanence). The advent of techno-science, by improving the conditions of existence, has thus made it possible to think of happiness here below and thus to develop new religiosities centered on success in this world (such as millenarianism and most alternative spiritualities). However, and without rejecting scientific discourses either, the sometimes cold and distant vision of materialism or scientism has favored the resurgence of a need to re-spiritualize one’s life, to find meaning beyond the material quest. This is what Ronald Inglehart (1977) analyzed with the passage from materialist values to post-materialist ones—some cohorts of the baby-boom generation (the so-called “countercultural movement”) have helped widely spread the latter in Western and post-industrial societies. From the 1960s–1970s, a new religious matrix was thus constituted within the counterculture: that of “spirituality” which defined itself in opposition to institutional religion. “Spirituality”<sup>2</sup> is a term claimed by the actors (i.e., emic posture) who identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious” persons. Initially marginal, spirituality is now widespread, so much that its themes have thoroughly penetrated popular culture (Adler [1979] 2006; Blain 2002; Blain and Wallis 2007; Blain et al. 2004; Berger and Ezzy 2007; Clifton 2006; Pike 2004; Partridge 2005, 2006; Possamai 2005; Taylor 2010; Gauthier 2012; Fedele 2012; Margry 2008).

### 1.3. Three Typologies of Contemporary Spirituality

In my previous research (Itel 2019), I showed that contemporary spirituality can be divided into three main currents. Each corresponds to a specific moment of spirituality’s evolution in Quebec and in French-speaking Europe. First, the “mystical-esoteric nebula” (Champion 1989) corresponds to the religious landscape of the 1970s to 1990s. It is more often known as “New Age spirituality”. According to Champion and Cohen, this nebula covers “a heterogeneous set of groups, or rather of networks, often loose, which can be more or less explicitly linked to constituted religious traditions—oriental religions (Hinduism, Buddhism) or more “exotic” (in particular to shamanism)—and which can also reactivate diverse esoteric practices” (Champion and Cohen 1993, p. 78). Focused on self-awareness and self-growth, the mystical-esoteric nebula instigates individuals to explore states of self-transcendence through mind-body or psycho-esoteric techniques.

Then, from the 2000s onwards, the “psycho-philosophical-spiritual” current (Garnoussi 2007) emerges. This demonstrates the insertion of more “secular” and intellectual disciplines into spirituality such as philosophy, which revives the ancient theme of wisdom, and the field of positive psychology. From then on—and this “therapeutic, or self-help

culture" (Illouz and Cabanas 2018) is what tends to dominate even today—spirituality takes on a pragmatic character and seeks to combine the psychological with the spiritual to teach the individual how to live better with himself and with others, as a path to ever-lasting happiness.

Finally, a third trend has become very prominent especially since the second half of the 2010s: that of ecospirituality. By "ecospirituality", I mean a type of spirituality that is defined by a desire and an explicit objective to connect or reconnect with "Nature" (and not only with the "cosmos", the "Universe", the "Self", or "Life"). My doctoral thesis is devoted to sensitive and spiritual approaches of (re)connection to nature in French-speaking Europe (France, Switzerland, and Belgium). Ecospirituality, as a movement but also as a discourse, is based on the articulation between two socio-historical currents: ecological thought and contemporary alternative spirituality. In this paper, I propose to begin by describing the methodology I am using. Then, I will outline the sociological and historical roots of ecospirituality. In the third part, I will present the main different currents that make up ecospirituality. Finally, I will end this article by exposing the different types of knowledge produced by ecospiritual actors, reconciling intuitive knowledge and rational knowledge.

## 2. Methodology<sup>3</sup>

### 2.1. Collecting Data

I use an ethnographic method of data collection, based on a comprehensive approach (Blanchet and Gotman 1992; Kaufmann 1996) and an exploratory approach where knowledge is considered an "interpersonal construction" (Mucchielli 2009). In order to understand what the sensitive and spiritual approaches to (re)connecting to nature in French-speaking Europe are, I conduct a multi-site ethnographic study combining several methodological approaches specific to qualitative research: participant observations, semi-directed interviews and a netnographic survey on social networks (Bernard 2004; Kozinets 2009; Mercanti-Guérin 2009). This methodological combination makes it possible to account for the subjective dimension of the actors while placing them in a particular structural framework (political, social, economic and cultural).

To date, I have conducted six participant observations at ecospiritual events (e.g., a Work that Reconnects workshop, a forest-therapy session, a Native American ritual of gratitude to the Pachamama). Many online events (e.g., conferences, seminars) on the subject are also taking place, and I have already observed some of them. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with 95 ecospiritual people living in France, French-speaking Switzerland (Romandie) and Belgium. To recruit them, I started by broadcasting on social networks (targeted Facebook groups, Instagram, and LinkedIn) a call for participation for any person recognizing themselves in a sensitive and/or spiritual approach of (re)connecting to nature in these three countries. I also identified some ecospiritual "leaders" on social networks and contacted them. Indeed, in addition to their online presence, I noticed that these leaders have all written books for the public, which helps spread ecospiritual discourses in the culture. In the continuation of this research, I will analyze a selection of these books and carry out my netnographic observation.

### 2.2. Data Presentation

Of the 95 participants, 28 are male. This is consistent with the largely female landscape of the holistic community (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Most participants are between the ages of 35 and 50 (only two people are under 25) and have a high socioeducational background. Although the majority are religiously socialized (primarily Christian), only five individuals consider themselves religiously affiliated (including one Catholic hermit and one Protestant deacon). As for professional background, a large proportion of participants work in the therapeutic milieu (psychotherapists, ecotherapists, psychologists, coaches, facilitators, etc.).

At this stage of the research, I note that ecospirituality is a transnational phenomenon (e.g., the Romand, French and Belgian networks are largely interpenetrated on a linguistic

basis), thus justifying an approach that privileges the circulation of actors rather than an overly restricted territorial anchoring or a focus on single leaders or organizations. Indeed, given the fluid and shifting nature of the phenomenon, it is not possible to focus on well-established groups (Pike 2004; Lucia 2020). While the diversity of activities is important, what they all have in common is that they propose a “spiritual path of connection to nature” that allows, according to my informants, a radical change in their way of being in the world. This new vision of the world takes the form of a “lived nature”, which is presented as a kind of new animism that claims to generate a respect for nature.

### 3. Sociological and Historical Roots of Ecospirituality

The term “ecospirituality” originates from two types of currents, which today are constantly intersecting and coming together: ecological thought and alternative spirituality. Indeed, to understand the conditions of emergence of an ecological spirituality (i.e., a form of religiosity that tends to sacralize nature and the elements that make it up), it is necessary to look at the sociological study of these two alternative movements.

#### 3.1. Ecological Thought and Alternative Spirituality

The first wave of ecological thought<sup>4</sup> emerges from the 18th century onwards, thanks to the discoveries of naturalists who spread a new interest in the natural world (Bourg and Fragnière 2014) and thus a different view of nature than the mechanistic and utilitarian one, stemming from modern science<sup>5</sup>. From then on, a new aesthetic sensibility emerged that valued the contemplation of the natural environment. The praise of nature, initiated by Rousseau as a refuge from the industrial world, runs through the Romantic movement as one of its main themes. In fact, Romanticism rebels against the disenchantment of the world (Weber [1904] 2004) and values the awakening of the senses and the spiritualization of everyday life. If the 19th century marks on the one hand the beginning of environmentalism with the environmental conservation movements, the adoption of several laws in favor of the protection of nature and the rise of ecology as a new science, it indicates on the other hand the emergence of an alternative spirituality composed of spiritualism, the Theosophical Society, anthroposophy, and other esoteric and occult currents. Many of the themes that are later found in New Age spirituality appear at this time (Pike 2004; Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996). During the second half of the 19th century, the Romantics who were part of these currents were also interested in Eastern religions and revived “primitive” forms of religion specific to Western cultural areas, such as paganism or shamanism. The interest in nature and in spirituality, respectively, also meet in the transcendentalist current carried by Emerson and Thoreau, which makes nature a path for spiritual maturation (Taylor 2010; Larrère and Larrère 2018).

The second wave of deployment of ecological consciousness begins in the aftermath of World War II, after Hiroshima, where people become aware of the global destructive potential of technology (Feenberg 2013). Since then, the second half of the twentieth century has witnessed ongoing critiques of the Western paradigm of modernity. Ecological thought fully unfolds during the 1960s–1970s, the era in which the countercultural movement that we are partly heir to today is emerging and which has allowed many voices to be raised in favor of environmental preservation (Bourseiller and Penot-Lacassagne 2013). It was also in these years that political ecology and “green” parties emerged. The counterculture is led by certain cohorts of the baby boom generation (Olazabal 2021), the “children of technocracy” (Roszak 1969), who wish to break with the model of society and the individual of early modernity. The counterculture, primarily the work of “drop-outs”, people who break with the hegemonic model in which they have been socialized, challenges the values of the dominant culture based on a bureaucratic, hierarchical, anthropocentric and rationalist system (Roof 1993).

For Warren and Fortin (2015, p. 13), the emergence of the counterculture “is part of a dynamic specific to the development of advanced capitalism [and is articulated to] a transformation of the economy—real and symbolic—of post-industrial countries”. It is

in the face of the global mutations of the world around them that the counter-culturalists launch into a “unanimous critique of global capitalism and promote another globalization, based on the respect of fundamental rights, on the resistance to neoliberalism, on social justice and on the preservation of the environment” (Bourseiller and Penot-Lacassagne 2013; Gaillard et al. 2012). These two decades saw the emergence of new social movements (Touraine 1978), such as environmentalism, that broke with the modes of action of trade unionism and shared the vision with some spiritual movements emerging at the same time, that to change society, one must first change oneself (bottom-up approach). For Warren and Fortin (2015), the hippies denounced the perversions of industrialization through the idea of a return to nature and the elaboration of a community, ecological and decentralized society where the human being is reinscribed in the cycle of the cosmos. It is the time of the libertarian utopias.

In the 1970s, environmental awareness accelerated. The celebration of Earth Day (1970), the Meadows Report (Meadows 1972), the birth of political ecology and the United Nations international conferences on the environment marked a decade in which the diffusion of environmentalism from above (scientific research, public policies, awareness-raising) and from below (alternative lifestyles in which the interdependence that links human beings to each other and to the universe is experimented with through the use of psychedelics Grisoni and Némot 2017) began to intersect. Environmental ethics questioned the anthropocentric posture of considering nature. Authors such as Leopold ([1949] 2017), Taylor ([1986] 2011) or Naess (1973) advocated for the adoption of an ecocentric vision. Thus, by distinguishing between superficial and deep ecology, Naess placed “ecological considerations in an ethical and metaphysical register” (Naess and Yerly-Brault [1973] 2021, p. 12). Deep ecology has been a characteristic of many different counter-culturalists; hippies and environmentalists then shared a common vision: their entanglement was not difficult, especially since the 1960s–1970s represent a period when religious beliefs were deeply questioned (Roof 1993).

Inherited from the democratization of the spiritualist current since the 19th century, a new religious landscape appeared in the second half of the 20th century. This contradicts the theory of secularization according to which religions would tend to disappear in modern societies because of the extension of science as a way of explaining the world (Berger 1967). A new anthropology, based on the subject and on the ethics of authenticity, is emerging alongside consumerism (Gauthier 2020; Taylor 2007). The processes of individualization and subjectivization reinforce the process of disaffiliation and deinstitutionalization of belief (Hervieu-Léger 1999; Lambert 2000; Willaime 2008): we can now choose who we want to become (Partridge 1999; Heelas and Woodhead 2005). The affirmation of a model of personal spirituality is taking over the Christian religion, perceived as institutional, dogmatic and closed on itself. Spiritual bricolage (Hervieu-Léger 2005) of beliefs and practices becomes the norm. It is possible to borrow elements from various religions, philosophical traditions and backgrounds (psychology, politics, science—including ecology) (Bergeron 2002) and rearrange them into a personal belief system (Altglas 2014; Lemieux 2003). This new system of “*religion à la carte*” will be referred to until today as *New Age religion* or *spirituality* (Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996; Liogier 2012; Gauthier 2021).

Distrustful of institutions and the authority they may represent (Christian religion, the state, etc.), actors favor a more subjective approach, based on personal experience as a path to authenticity and legitimacy (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). This spirituality is therefore largely non-institutionalized, heterogeneous, subjective, experiential, immanent and intramundane. New Age spirituality is often described in terms of a spiritual marketplace (Van Hove 1999; Roof 1999; Carrette and King 2004; Illouz 2019) as reclaimed by the market mechanisms that now govern late modernity (Gauthier 2013; Gauthier and Martikainen 2013). Other sociologists have proposed various typologies, such as those described in the introduction (Champion 1989; Garnoussi 2007). Gauthier (2013), for his part, argues that these phenomena would not so much be the manifestation of a decomposition of religion as of a profound recomposition due to a change in religious “regime” (from the Nation-State to the Global-Market).

### 3.2. Research on Ecological Spirituality

In sociology, the intersection between spirituality and ecology is realized in several ways. First, following Lynn White's ([1967] 2019) article "The Roots of Our Ecological Crisis", theologians and sociologists of religion began to look within traditional religions for elements of "greening" that might make them amenable to a greening movement (Tucker et al. 2016). Others, from environmental sociology, have noted in the alternative lifestyles of activists that spirituality may be important in their journey (Aspe and Jacqu   2012; Andrieu and Sirost 2014; Chamel 2019). Finally, researchers—mainly Anglo-Saxon—have focused on the different facets of ecological spirituality. One of the major contributions to this field is Bron Taylor's *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Taylor 2010). He argues that followers of dark green religion come primarily from environmentalist backgrounds (scientists, activists, politicians, citizens) and share three main beliefs: that nature is sacred, that it has intrinsic value, and that it deserves to be respected for what it is. However, Taylor's work is restricted mostly to the North American context and therefore does not consider the specificities of the French-speaking Western world. A few Swiss researchers, including the social anthropologist Irene Becci, have been interested in the application of such terminology in French-speaking Switzerland and have investigated the traces of a spiritualization of ecology within the green milieu (Becci et al. 2019, 2020, 2021). They have thus shown that spiritual ecologists "often came to a certain awareness by means of scientific study, whereas ecological spiritualists tended to integrate ecological views alongside holistic practices" (Becci 2022, p. 113), which shows the entanglement of the two historically constitutive streams of ecospirituality.

### 3.3. Epic Science as a Framework for Ecospirituality

Ecospirituality has thus integrated into its frame of reference a scientific explanation of the world which is, however, mixed with other, sometimes more esoteric theories. As the historian of religions Kocku von Stuckrad reminds us in his book *A Cultural History of the Soul. Europe and North America from 1870 to the Present* (2022), many secular systems have contributed to the generation of new cosmologies and spiritual interpretations, as is the case with Darwinism or more recently with ecological science. Moreover, many scientists who publish books for the public do not hesitate to add a religious, sacred dimension to their words, as is the case with Rachel Carson and her best-seller *Silent Spring* (von Stuckrad 2022; Pelletier 2021), which has greatly influenced the ecological milieu. As von Stuckrad reminds us, quoting Dowd and Barlow, "science banishes mystery and the miraculous, but the knowledge it returns is itself a thing of wonder and the stuff of magic" (von Stuckrad 2022, p. 219).

Rather than creating atheism, science can also generate re-enchanting worldviews. This is what Martin Eger (again quoted in von Stuckrad 2022, p. 219) has called "epic science"—namely, a narrative that begins with the big bang and then, in various stages, heads toward the arrival of human culture. Borrowing, this time, from the esoteric and occult traditions that notably shape the field of contemporary spirituality, epic science integrates a vision of the human being as having to become aware of himself and as an integral part of the universe. According to a more or less divine plan, "the universe" has a plan, a direction which drives life toward greater cooperation and which will allow humanity to live in greater harmony with other species and with the Earth.

Unlike non-spiritual ecologist activists, I have observed that relatively few ecospiritualists suffer from eco-anxiety. While most do not question the possibility of collapse—of resources or civilization—they do believe in the resilience of human beings and their ability to evolve toward greater consciousness.

## 4. The Ecospiritual Nebula

Ecospirituality is both a discourse (meso level) and a set of beliefs and practices (micro level). Based on my observations and interviews, I have been able to identify several currents that take place within the ecospiritual nebula. Together, they testify to its diversity,

which is comparable to other typologies of spirituality often made up of informal and diffuse networks.

#### 4.1. Ecopsychology

“Ecopsychology” represents a field of research and practice founded by Theodore Roszak (1992) that explores the interrelationships between nature and the human psyche. Ecopsychology seeks to address “the psychological and emotional components of environmental problems” (Egger 2017, p. 20) and restore our relationship with nature (Macy and Brown 2018; Fisher 2002; Egger 2015; Romanens and Guérin 2021). Ecopsychology is in line with deep ecology, which has rethought “ecological considerations in an ethical and metaphysical register” (Naess and Yerly-Brault [1973] 2021, p. 12). Among its best-known practices is the “Work that Reconnects”, proposed by Joanna Macy to prevent environmental activists from burnout. The Work that Reconnects is facilitated by one or more facilitators and is offered in various structures such as the Réseau de la Transition intérieure, directed by Michel Maxime Egger in Switzerland.

#### 4.2. Eco-Therapies

“Ecotherapy” is a “field of practice concerned with the development of relationships between individuals and nature from the perspective of health, building and enriching the human–nature bond” (Cosquer 2021, p. 17; see also Clinebell 1996). Many ecotherapeutic practices include rituals cobbled together from “neoshamanic” elements (medicine wheel, Celtic agricultural calendar) and from Jungian psychology (archetypal work, collective unconscious). The most visible practice is forest-therapy which arrived from Japan (sometimes known as “Shinrin Yoku”): for a few hours, the participant is invited to take a “forest bath”; he/she often immerses himself/herself in silence in the forest and thus benefits from the (scientifically proven) virtues of the molecules of the trees on his/her physiological and psychic health. There are also various floritherapies, therapies through animal contact (such as equitherapy), etc.

#### 4.3. Ethnobotany

“Ethnobotany” (and its application, ethnoherbalism) is a disciplinary field studying “flora-society relations and based on the collection of popular naturalist knowledge” (Brousse 2017, p. 3). Ethnoherbalism considers the intentionality of plants and proposes to transmit the teachings of wild plants to humans (Lemonnier 2020).

#### 4.4. Neoshamanism and Neopaganism

There are also certain trends in neoshamanism and neopaganism (Pike 2004; Harvey 2007, 2011, 2017) that intend, respectively, to show animistic practices of indigenous societies, whether exotic (Native American shamanisms) or more local (European Druidism), through the rhythmic use of drumming, shamanic trance or plant, mineral and animal communication. They also tend to show how to reconnect with the natural elements through soli-lunar rituals, and through the celebration of the Celtic agricultural calendar, etc.

#### 4.5. Esoteric Practices

Some practices of the “mystical-esoteric nebula” such as magnetism, geobiology and mediumship to enter in communication with the “beings of nature” are also evoked. This field takes a more “magical” turn than the others.

### 5. Different Types of Knowledge<sup>6</sup> in Ecospirituality

#### 5.1. Intuitive Knowledge

Ecospirituality is not unlike other types of contemporary spirituality: its regime of authenticity is based on individual experience, which implies a strong involvement of the body and emotions (Becci 2022). For my informants, connecting with nature goes through sensorial, sensitive and non-rational approaches. It is a true bodily experience, difficult to

describe in words, which often leads to a strong sense of belonging and expansion of the self. For example, Celine describes her immersive experience in the forest in Costa Rica:

“In Costa Rica, I had an experience that changed my relationship, my connection to nature. I went with gold miners; we crossed the forest. During this crossing of the forest, all my senses were exacerbated. And after three days spent here, we arrived on a beach, and there it was as if I had done a “reset”. The place was so beautiful, it’s hard to put words to this feeling. I really felt like I belonged there, like I was home, like I was coming home. I felt in the forest there that I was going into a temple, into my own temple. Now, I put the word “unity” on that feeling because I’ve been on a spiritual journey to try to understand this sacred side of nature, but, at the time, 20 years ago, it was just a phenomenal rush of juice where I said to myself, “I’m from here, I want to live here”. I decided to stay in Costa Rica and to invest in other forms of tourism, to take care of the earth, the living, to raise awareness, to travel differently. In Costa Rica, I met a lot of guardians of the earth, people invested in the protection of their land and with this desire, this pride to transmit, to protect”.

When I ask, “What is nature to you?”, most people say, like Céline, “But nature is me! I am nature”; and when I ask, “What do you do in nature?”, most do nothing. At most, they walk and hike. Many meditate, contemplate, observe, and blend into the environment. They put themselves in a state of readiness to access full presence. Here is what Nathalie, a forest-bathing guide, answers:

“Often nothing at all. I sit down, I find a place that suddenly calls to me, where there’s sun. Then I sit down. And then I always have a notebook and a pen with me. And then I let myself be a bit empty like that. Sometimes I write a little bit. That’s all I do”.

As another example, Marilyn, an ethnoherbalist, says:

“I try to be, to be and to merge with nature. I like the practice of the sit spot: half an hour a day every day, you go to a place that you choose, in the same place, to do nothing and just be there. It allows you to create your anchorage in fact”.

Thus, we could say they have a non-utilitarian view of nature. They are just here and open to experience, and they ultimately know that they belong here, that humanity is just one realm of the living. “There is no separation between nature and me”, says Marianne, an ecotherapist. What they experiment can be called *embodied* or *intuitive knowledge*. More than just being passive, ecospirituals tend to rely heavily on a mode of knowledge production that comes from the senses, hence the body, though it can sometimes demand some training to shut the mind down (a lot of informants have been meditating over the years). Joëlle, a geobiologist and a druidic practitioner, explains:

“[Connecting with nature] is mainly done through contemplation and wonder. All experiences pass through the gates of being that are the five senses. The five senses allow us to connect with our deepest nature. So, to go into nature and open our five senses, it immediately allows us to be in the present moment: the heart opens up, the aura is growing. These are simple things: I love lying on the ground, watching how the trees organize themselves so that they don’t touch each other too much, so that they don’t compete to get access to the sun. This moment of contemplation inspires respect . . . It just asks to stop and take the time and to be available to the experience”.

However, feeling deeply this sense of belonging can also sometimes be very spontaneous, as a mystical experience would be. Then, it is non-verbal, and it depends on a sensual mode of being-in-the-world that reveals a full integration between the self and the environment. As Nathalie says:

“These more frequent immersions to nature have a consequence that I had not imagined: sometimes, at night, on the verge of falling asleep, I am nature, I feel

tree, air, bird, stump. This wonderful experience is difficult to explain in words. What I do now is connect with nature wherever it is, without waiting to be in the forest: grasses between cobblestones, the shades of the sky, the sun above a building, the green plants in my house, the falling rain. I gather colors, sounds, smells. These are meaningful moments of connection to nature”.

Sometimes, nature is viewed as something sacred, as Joëlle states: “Nature is a temple. It is the most beautiful of all churches for me”.. This pre-reflective process allows them to experiment the so-called inherent value of nature and to adopt an ecocentric posture.

Specifically, the ecospirituals here interviewed are more or less all situated within an animistic worldview, true to what Graham Harvey has called the “new animism” (2017). Unlike pantheism, which views the earth as living and divine—which some may believe in, of course—contemporary animism favors an approach based on a relationship with-the-world as a “community of persons, only some of whom are human, but all of whom deserve respect”. Most of the people I interviewed consider plants, animals and even minerals as their partners, like Nathalie who considers trees as “companions”. Hervé, a nature educator who is feeling “culturally close to the indigenous peoples”, explains:

“Nature is a connected web where all things are linked, either physically or energetically. It is information flowing in all directions. When I take a group to a natural area, we arrive at a place where there are territories occupied by other living beings. And we’re going to identify the traces, the clues of these living beings, whose home we are. That way, we don’t arrive as dominators, we ask for permission, and we come to live with them for a while. Humility is very important. The idea is to cooperate with these living beings, to communicate with them. We are not above them, we can have relationships with these residents, whether they are animals or plants. That’s animistic thinking. In any case, I tend to have an animistic way of thinking in my relationship with nature. These are the experiences I have. Afterwards, I used the word “animist” because that’s the word used by the indigenous peoples. It induces a form of respect, as a natural consequence of an intimate and strong relationship with all living beings. And we are part of this as other beings”.

Some ecospirituals are indeed interested in the cultures of indigenous peoples and can, in a way, identify with their sacralized vision of nature. Often, however, their spontaneous feelings of connection in nature echo the successive readings they make of these distant cultures. The posture on indigenous peoples is varied among ecospirituals: some are fascinated and have gone to meet them directly to learn about their spiritual practices; others recognize their contribution but are wary of the possible cultural appropriation that could result from it; many prefer to connect to European ancestral wisdoms via Druidic neopaganism.

## 5.2. Scientific Knowledge

These pre-reflective experiences are also nourished by extensive reading. The ecospirituals I have met have a very high level of education: almost 40 have at least a Master’s degree, and 9 have a doctorate. They are, therefore, an informed and well-read public. In recent years, the literary market about the “environment” and “relationship with nature” has literally exploded. Many researchers from the human and social sciences have become known to the public, such as the philosopher Baptiste Morizot or the anthropologists Philippe Descola and Nastassja Martin—both specialists in animism in indigenous cultures. Many ecospirituals are familiar with Descola’s system of four ontologies, which serves as an analytical grid for understanding their feelings (close to animism vs. the modern naturalistic explanation of the world, based on the separation of man and nature). Hervé states:

“There are the moderns, the moderns with their cultural and naturalistic schemes in the sense of Philippe Descola. So, for me, it’s a form of materialistic and logical-

mathematical thinking, in France, in the United States, all the moderns. And then there is the diversity of other cultures which are disappearing one by one, which are multifaceted, which are much more diversified, which are being erased by this modern culture which is hegemonic”.

These references are regularly used in discourses, especially when the use of the term “nature” is questioned, in favor of the more inclusive “living”. Finally, ecospirituals are eager for scientific knowledge about ecosystems. The success of the book *The Secret Life of Trees*, by forester Peter Wohlleben, testifies to the interest in the world of living things, with a focus on the relationship between species. For example, Laurine, who is originally a social worker, has created an ecotherapy center with her husband which includes horse therapy, horticultural therapy, and a permaculture vegetable garden. She says:

“We have a huge library of basic botany with all the books on birds, insects, so we can determine them, recognize them and understand them. And now I’m still learning with MOOCs [Massive Open Online Courses]. There are some really interesting ones, and they can be on botany, gardening with the living, on lichens, with specializations each time”.

Embodied, intuitive knowledge and cognitive, intellectual knowledge are therefore not mutually exclusive in this context, but on the contrary are enriched by contact with one another. Descending from a long lineage rooted in Romanticism that values affect and experience, ecospirituality as a discourse is positioned as a complement, or an alternative, to scientific discourses that seek in rationality and technique a solution to the current ecological crisis. Here, the scientific and rational knowledge is not superior to the sensitive one. Empirical knowledge of nature tends to validate the cognitive one. Conversely, scientific knowledge tends to legitimize incorporated knowledge as the dominant ethos is still a rational one. Therefore, both are entangled and directed towards the creation of a new relationality to nature. This allows them to develop a certain agentivity that prevents them from sinking into catastrophist discourses that tend to paralyze any individual action. The lived experience of nature gives ecospirituals a certain authority and critical knowledge over the dogmas of political ecology. Perhaps this is the political dimension of ecospirituality: that of questioning the authority of any institution, including the very source from which it comes in part, namely political ecology.

## 6. Conclusions

The contribution of this article to the religion and science field is shedding new light on the intricacies of the relationship between spirituality and different types of knowledge-claims from the point of view of ecospirituality in the French-speaking European context. I first presented theoretically the roots of ecospirituality, which are found in ecological thought and in contemporary spirituality by presenting these two alternative currents. While this study is a result of an ongoing project and additional empirical data will no doubt enrich the findings presented here, I have also defined here the main currents that make up ecospirituality, based on my field observations, which are the following: ecopsychology, eco-therapies, ethnobotany, neoshamanism and neopaganism and some elements from the “mystical-esoteric nebula”. Despite their supposed diversity, they all convey an ecocentric and an animistic worldview that helps ecospirituals deeply feel connected to nature. I will conclude this article with a final question. Given the importance and place of sensations in ecospirituality, would it not be more appropriate to use the notion of “ecosensitivity” to describe the cosmology and experience of these people, rather than “ecospirituality”? Without leaving aside the place of the transcendent and the sacred in some ecospiritual practices, it seems, however, that the common characteristic of these is the connection to nature (and to oneself) through the senses. This allows them to develop a particular sensitivity to the world in their lives, one that is both rooted in and turned towards something greater than oneself, i.e., the “living”, but which is lived in the “middle world” (to use a shamanistic term), on Earth and in one’s body.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Here, the concepts of “science” and “religion” are understood as social structures (macro level) that provide a mode of explanation of the world (rational on the one hand and sacred on the other) and which, within modernity, enter into competition. These social structures happen to take specific forms according to the context they emerge from (meso level). For example, in the context of modernity, traditional religion is considered as being “institutionalised, scripturalised, dogmatic, belief-centred, differentiated, (mono)theistic, hierarchical, centralised, ideological, homogenised, territorial, and nation-bound” (Gauthier 2020, p. 5). It usually corresponds to “historical religions” (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, etc.). It is this traditional form of religion that has been challenged by the the desecularisation theory and the emergence of different types of religiosities (micro level) disclosing new ways of conceiving, and experimenting with, the “sacred” (i.e., personal appropriations and experiences of religion revealing the articulation between subjective creativity and social determinations).
- <sup>2</sup> I will come back to “spirituality” as a concept later.
- <sup>3</sup> As I write this article, my doctoral research is still ongoing and further empirical data will enrich the observations presented here.
- <sup>4</sup> The rise of ecological thought is recounted in various anthologies that often democratize the great texts of its founders (Bourg and Fragnière 2014; Debourdeau 2013; Worster 1998; Hébert 2006; Bourg and Papaux 2015) but also in several works on the anthropological imagination of nature (Sajolili and Grésillon 2019; Liogier 2018; Guichard-Anguis et al. 2014; Hess 2013; Ducarme and Couvet 2020; Charbonnier 2015).
- <sup>5</sup> Modern science refers to the approach and methodology used in scientific research and investigation that has developed since the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries. It is characterised by the use of the scientific method, which involves the formulation and empirical testing of hypotheses through controlled experiments and systematic observation.
- <sup>6</sup> Here, ‘knowledge’ is used to show how ecospirituality as a discourse (which is based on practices) is articulated from two levels of knowledge used by the actors.

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