

RE 698-A Major Research Paper,  
Submitted in partial fulfillment  
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Master of Arts  
Department of Religion, Culture and Global Justice

# Effecting a Profound Interior Conversion

## **An exploration of religion as an agent of change**

“The great hope of society  
is in individual character.”

-William Ellery Channing

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## 1. Introduction: the what and why of this study

January 2020 was Earth's hottest January on record according to scientists at NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information<sup>1</sup>. Grave concern for global warming is reflected in Paragraph 14 of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>2</sup>. It identifies climate change as "one of the greatest challenges of our time", stating "its adverse impacts undermine the ability of all countries to achieve sustainable development...The survival of many societies, and of the biological support systems of the planet, is at risk" (*Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform*, 2017). As such, UN Sustainable Development Goal 13, Climate Action (SDG 13), was set, aiming to "take urgent action to combat climate change and its impact...[targeting] the integration of climate change measures into national policies, the improvement of education, awareness-raising and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warnings" (*Climate Change: Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform*, 2015). How are the targets of this Climate Action Goal, together with the other 16 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to be achieved within the next 10 years?

The European Union Science Hub says there are six key transformations needed to achieve the SDGs in a manageable way<sup>3</sup>. The first transformation is stated in part as: "Substantial advances

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<sup>1</sup> January 2020 was Earth's hottest January on record | National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. (February 13, 2020.). Wwww.Noaa.Gov. <https://www.noaa.gov/news/january-2020-was-earth-s-hottest-january-on-record>

<sup>2</sup>The Agenda includes 17, high-level Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the U.N. in 2015. A description of the goals is provided in Appendix A.

<sup>3</sup> The six key transformations are: (1) advances in human capacity; (2) responsible consumption and production; (3) decarbonizing the energy system; (4) access to nutritional food and clean water for all; (5) smart cities; (6) digital revolution " (*Six Steps to Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals*, 2018).

in **human capacity** are needed through improvements of education and healthcare” (*Six Steps to Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals*, 2018) (original emphasis). Are improvements of education and healthcare the only means of advancing human capacity? This study investigates whether religion, as defined herein, can also contribute to this end, specifically as a means of enabling the individual to actualize their potential—to be empowered to operate at their personal full capacity, so to speak—to most effectively collaborate and cooperate in combating climate change and its impacts. Masuzawa (2005), writing on world religions, notes that, justified or not, the discipline of religious studies as a whole seems to hold fast to the bottom line that “[r]eligion is found everywhere; it is an essential and irreducible aspect of human life” (p. 317). In the context of the psychology of religion, Paloutzian (2017) similarly notes that nothing has played a more persistent, durable role than religion in the personal and social lives of human beings, manifesting in acts of both love and brutality; religiously motivated behaviour [positive and negative] is alive and well today, in all cultures around the globe (p. 7).

In light of its largely perceived ubiquity and essentialness, and considering its disparate manifestations, I contend it is important to explore religion’s agency as a facilitator of an individual’s actualization or development to full potential to benefit humanity as a whole. The Union of International Associations (UIA)<sup>4</sup> lists 1166 international organizations directly or indirectly working to address climate change and its impacts (*Global Civil Society & the UN Sustainable Development Goals / Union of International Associations*, n.d.). These organizations, as with any other, would be most effective in their work, if comprised of

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<sup>4</sup> The Union of International Associations (UIA) is non-profit, apolitical, independent, and non-governmental in nature; it is a pioneer in the research, monitoring and provision of information on international organizations, international associations and their global challenges.

empowered, highly functioning individuals working effectively together. Regarding empowerment, in his study on what influences young Americans to support social causes, Derrick (2019) notes that climate change is their number-one issue of concern but “their feelings of empowerment dramatically affect whether they continue on the awareness-to-action journey or choose to stay on the sidelines” (webpage *What Influences Young Americans to Support Social Causes*). Derrick says young Americans want to act; they just don’t believe that they’re capable of meaningful action, which, he says, is the very definition of lack of empowerment. Does or can religion foster an individual’s empowerment, their transformation from awareness to action?

Religion as an agent of personal change<sup>5</sup> is discussed in this essay against the backdrop of the 2015 encyclical presented by Pope Francis called “*Laudato Si’: On Care for our Common Home*” (Francis, 2015), hereinafter referred to as “*Laudato Si’*”. *Laudato Si’*, intended to be addressed to a global audience<sup>6</sup> (not just Roman Catholics), captured my attention during my Masters studies in religion and globalization. Further, as a professional life coach committed to enhancing my understanding of the nature of personal change and motivation, the Pope’s phrase “profound interior conversion” in the encyclical particularly enticed me to further investigation. The 42,000-word document is a detailed critique of consumerism and unsustainable development, a lamentation of environmental degradation and climate change, and a call for all people of the world to take swift and unified global action to address the ecological crisis. The

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<sup>5</sup> The term ‘personal change’ is used interchangeably throughout this essay with ‘personal transformation’, ‘individuation’, ‘personal development’, ‘realization of potential’, ‘empowerment’, ‘personal growth’, ‘self-actualization’. A description of the term ‘self-actualization’ provided by Paloutzian (2017) best conveys the general meaning conveyed by these terms. Self-actualization describes the direction of movement, the purposive growth process—the process of becoming—rather than on attaining a static end state, i.e. the individual’s unfolding and fulfilling of the natural potential that is part of the self (p. 29).

<sup>6</sup>Evidence of this intended global audience is provided in footnote 21.

Pope says the global ecological crisis is a summons to “profound interior conversion” (Francis, 2015, para. 217). My study probes religion’s ability to bring about this requisite conversion.

To conduct this investigation, my research draws from primary and secondary scholarship in the fields of psychology of motivation, religion, and environmentalism; it also benefits from non-academic online articles and reports. Research was undertaken with the goal of linking the three study areas in order to respond to the following question:

Considering the nature of religion as conceived in this paper, is religion—or might it be—an agent of enduring personal change and motivation that empowers individuals to most effectually collaborate and cooperate in achieving the U.N.’s Climate Action Goal?

I firstly attempt to demonstrate through research that agency of personal change (goal achievement) lies in enabling, fostering or supporting the individual’s alignment of their beliefs (personality) and ways of thinking (values) and motivated behaviour, specifically in connection with SDG 13; and, secondly, I investigate if religion by its nature can effect this alignment.

By “connecting the dots” of motivation, religion and environmentalism<sup>7</sup>, it is also my hope that this study will provoke further research at this three-way intersection. Current scholarship links motivation and religion and also links religion and environmentalism, but seemingly not all three together. Despite a wealth of literature at these two separate intersections,

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<sup>7</sup> Climate action, specified in the essay question, is one aspect of “environmentalism”. Environmentalism pertains to concerns about, and action aimed at, a wide range of environmental problems unprecedented in magnitude, pace of development, and severity; those problems include anthropogenic climate change ('global warming'), the depletion of stratospheric ozone (the 'ozone hole'), the acidification of surface waters ('acid rain'), the destruction of tropical forests, the depletion and extinction of species, and the precipitous decline of biodiversity. While all of these problems have physical (environmental) manifestations, their causes—and their potential solutions—are invariably bound up with human attitudes, beliefs, values, needs, desires, expectations, and behaviours (*The Environmental Crisis*, 2009).

I was unsuccessful in finding material connecting all three study areas. Such tri-intersectional studies may exist, but my research challenge suggests a paucity of this scholarship when, in this time of climate crisis, I believe it would serve humanity well to understand and harness all means of advancing human capacity, one of which may be religion.

To more clearly define the motive of my research, it's helpful to say what this study is not. Paloutzian (2017) says religiousness can be conceptualized at both cultural and personal levels. (p. 37). The focus of this study is on religiosity at the personal level, regarding how it operates in the individual's life, possibly fostering self-actualization. This is not a study of how religion serves to connect individuals for theological, social, cultural or functional purposes. It does not consider how a religion may foster a sense of belonging and community. It's not a study of how religious or religiously affiliated organizations may promote respect and care for the environment by organizing and implementing "green" projects, for example parish initiatives put forth by the Global Catholic Climate Movement<sup>8</sup>. It's not a study of the efficacy of the global system of religions as a communication network to disseminate environmental messaging and action. While extensive study of religion at the societal or cultural levels exists and complements my investigation of religion as an agent of personal change requisite to achievement of environmental goals, study at those levels is beyond the scope of this essay.

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<sup>8</sup> The Global Catholic Climate Movement website: <https://catholicclimatemovement.global/parish-initiatives/> lists examples of "green" initiatives that can be undertaken at the parish level.

As related point of interest, in my April 2020 unpublished research paper called: *Effecting Profound Interior Conversion: Is the U.S. Roman Catholic Church up to the Task?*, I concluded that the Roman Catholic Church in America lacks both human resources (qualified clergy and lay leaders) to substantially sustain motivation to implement environmental initiatives and an effective organizational framework to support the initiatives. The paper was submitted in partial fulfillment of the credit requirements for course RE632E, Religion and Globalization, Wilfrid Laurier University.

Furthermore, my study is not an assessment of the SDG 13 targets or a critique of the recommendations for meeting them.

With the aim of backgrounding and clearly presenting my investigation and findings, this essay is structured into five sections in addition to this Introduction, namely: (2) The Individual: humanity's great hope – an explanation of the requirement to focus on the individual to achieve the SDGs; (3) Profound Interior Conversion: changing personal masters – a dive into motivation, personality and values fundamental to discussion of transformation and empowerment of the individual; (4) This Thing Called Religion: distilled into definition – a description of the terms 'spirituality', 'religion' and 'religions', to ensure common understanding of the concepts that underlie the consideration of religion as a change agent; (5) Religion as Agent of Change: maybe, maybe not – a discussion of the efficacy of religion as a motivator of personal change and growth; and (6) Motivation, Religion, Environmentalism: standing at the intersection – concluding remarks and a look at future study.

In this section I've frequently made mention of the "individual", and the reason for this focus is succinctly expressed in a quote by William Ellery Channing, a leading Unitarian theologian in the United States in the early nineteenth century: "The great hope of society is in individual character" (context unknown). The next section elaborates on my reasoning.

## **(2) The Individual: humanity's great hope**

The individual person is, unquestionably, the basic unit of any grouping within human society. The functionality or effectiveness of a group—a work unit, a board of representatives, a hockey team, a government office, an institution—is largely dependent upon the ability of the individuals within the group to collaboratively, cooperatively and healthfully interact. Ludema &

Johnson (2019), writing for Forbes, said “the differentiator between a good team, and a great team is *commitment to the personal growth of each team member*” (n.p.) (original emphasis). As such, I posit it’s in our global society’s interest to prioritize that which empowers the individual to bring the best version of themselves into interpersonal relationships and endeavours. One such endeavour would include working collectively to achieve the UN’s Climate Action Goal, which, as previously noted, involves among other things, integration of climate change measures into national policies, the improvement of education, awareness-raising and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation. Adapting the Channing quote, I say the great hope of society lies in *empowered, unfettered* individual characters working together to solve our myriad problems such as global warming and its impacts. Empowerment and elimination of constraints inhere in personal development.

Personal development—transformation, actualization or realization—refers to the fulfillment of a person’s talents, skills and potentialities that provides meaning and purpose. In training for my professional life coach certification, in subsequent coaching practice, and in my research into the psychology of motivation as discussed in Section 3, I’ve come to understand that enduring motivation of the type required to support an individual’s development of their potentiality is based on the neurological science of the brain’s reward system; individuals will generally be more highly motivated to sustained action or behaviour that feels rewarding because it is meaningful and purposeful to them. Bundgaard (n.d.), founder of the coaching organization, Motivation Factor, and co-author of the book *The Motivated Brain* with neuroscientist, Jefferson Roy, explains on the organization’s website that the goals which give people the greatest sustained energy and motivation are those which have personal meaning or which are connected to a larger purpose (website page *More About Purpose*). When both personal meaning and connectivity tie to goals, I suggest, commitment to goal achievement is strongest.

“Connected to a larger purpose” implies that engagement with others is required for an individual to fully actualize. Covey (2004) in his extremely popular, personal change book called *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*, supports this contention. The author notes most of us see independence as the pinnacle of personal evolution, having arrived there from childhood dependency; however, as he explains, the move from independence to interdependence is actually necessary for full human maturity and societal wellbeing (p. 49-51).

This is not a recent concept. Centuries ago, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*<sup>9</sup>, Aristotle elaborated on the significance and nature of relationships, saying to the effect we cannot develop our potentiality unless we engage in relationships with others (Weidel, 2019, p. 28). In present day terminology, realization of an individual’s potential is about moving from the “I” paradigm—I am self-sufficient, I can do this by myself, I am capable, I am responsible, I am independent—to the “we” paradigm—we can do it together, we can cooperate, we can synergize, we can combine our talents and abilities, we can achieve something greater together, we are interdependent for the good of you and I and all. Operating most effectively in the “we” paradigm, which is vital to resolving problems, first necessitates mastery in the “I” paradigm, i.e. actualization of the self (Covey, 2004, p. 49). This actualization, I posit, is essentially what Pope Francis is alluding to in his term “profound interior conversion”, which involves changing personal masters, as I discuss in the next section.

### **(3) Profound interior conversion: changing personal masters**

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<sup>9</sup>The Nicomachean Ethics consists of ten books comprising Aristotle's best-known work on ethics.

This paper attempts to ascertain if effectual impetus and enablement of personal change, —or “profound interior conversion”—inhere in religion. Pope Francis said this conversion is requisite to solving our ecological crisis. Although perhaps no one else has used the exact words as the Pope, I came across numerous instances of similar sentiment in academic writings, most of which precede *Laudato Si’*. A few examples of such phrases are:

- “a dramatic conversion of heart”, said as being required for us to abandon our consumerist lifestyle and our old ways of thinking (Braun *et al*, 2007, p. 41),
- “changing our minds and hearts”, opined as being required in addition to a technological solution to the environmental crisis (Schmiesing, 2010, n.p.);
- “moral transformation”, about what is needed because environmental destruction is rooted in human pride, greed, and selfishness (Gottlieb, 2004, p. 732);
- “a fundamental shift in mindset”, is what is required to learn how to grow our economy without harming nature (Lambertini, 2018, n.p.).
- “a shift in consciousness” is what moving toward sustainability is primarily about (Johnston, 2014, p. 1).

What is this “dramatic conversion” or “fundamental shift” that many speak of without an accompanying explanation as to how to effect it?

Conversion—or personal transformation—may be rapid and abrupt as in the Saul-to-Paul conversion on the road to Damascus story<sup>10</sup>, or it may be gradual evolution along the slow and committed path of integrating body, mind and spirit that changes how we operate, behave, think, and feel (Jones, 2005, p. 185). No matter how it presents—in an event or process—sources agree that conversion is radical in scope; it causes a break, a fundamental perceptual shift that creates

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<sup>10</sup> According to the New Testament, this was a sudden, transformational event in the life of Paul the Apostle that led him to cease persecuting early Christians and to become a follower of Jesus.

discontinuity and a structural change in essential nature accompanied by an “aha”, an awakening, a new awareness (Brown & Miller, 2005, p. 169-171). The descriptor “radical” aligns with the adjective “profound” that Pope Francis uses in the term “profound interior conversion”. “Interior” could be substituted with the word “intrinsic”, which I speak to below, and “conversion” might be replaced with “paradigm shift”, discussed above. This shift to a new paradigm is what the subtitle of this section means in the context of this paper—changing an environmentally unaware, uncommitted or unfriendly paradigm that is currently the master of a person’s life to a new paradigm. For this study, the new paradigm is the individual’s new perception and mobilization of their actualized, empowered self as a symbiotic constituent integrant of the environment, and a collaborative and cooperative contributor to climate action in accordance with SDG 13.

Radical change and dedication to “serving a new master” necessitates enduring motivation. In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis opines that a “commitment this lofty [a more passionate concern for the protection of our world] cannot be sustained by doctrine alone, without a spirituality capable of inspiring us, without an ‘interior impulse which encourages, motivates, nourishes and gives meaning to our individual and communal activity’” (para. 216). The Pope says that such change is impossible without both motivation that sustains a lofty commitment to ecological sustainability, and education (para. 15). Many things have to change course, he says, but it is we human beings above all who need to change (para 202). But, in what way do we human beings need to change to achieve this lofty commitment?

In his article “Religion and the Sustainable Development Goals”, Freston (2019), referring to the Pope’s phrase “profound interior conversion”, postulates that the survival of the world seemingly depends on a successful ‘conversionist mission’, and asks “exactly what is the message to be disseminated?” (p. 165). And this, I argue, is the crux of the matter. What is the requisite

motivating message of change and how can it effectively reach everyone across the “global environmental sustainability milieu”? The “milieu”, put forth by the American scholar and conservationist Bron Taylor (2010) and described in detail by Johnston (2014), a former PhD student of Taylor, refers to the environmentalism spectrum from non-environmentalists who do not support sustainability and have no affinity for those who do, to those who deeply support it, holding nature as sacred or intrinsically valuable<sup>11</sup>.

How to most effectively motivate individuals across the human spectrum in general—regardless of character and beliefs—so as to actualize the best version of their self is the subject of scholarship (Miller & Delaney, 2005), (Parks & Guay, 2009), (Schwartz, 2012), (Ross, 2015) (Rusu, 2019), numerous popular psychology articles, professional workshops, and coaching websites<sup>12</sup>. Based on my research, and aligned with my prior understanding of personal motivation developed primarily during my aforementioned professional life coach training, the essential characteristics of motivation are: it is either internally or externally sourced and is either positive or negative in origin, and most significantly “the ideal type of motivation is internal-positive because the motivation is coming from a place of strength and security” (Taylor, 2012, n.p.). (Although insecurity or negative emotion (guilt, shame, fear) can also lead to successful goal achievement, Taylor notes it’s rarely accompanied by happiness, and, I would add, therefore difficult to sustain.) Ross (2015) likewise says intrinsic motivation, which he calls “self-motivation” has “higher stature” than externally-based motivation because the individual is fulfilling something

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<sup>11</sup> A visual rendering of the milieu is presented in Appendix B, together with a description of “sustainability”.

<sup>12</sup> A Google search yielded 339 million results in response to the query: personal development coaching.

they themselves want and not the expectation imposed by others. This linkage of goal fulfilment to personal needs or wants ensures a stronger commitment to success (p. 64).

I suggest that this internal, or intrinsic, source of motivation is akin to what Pope Francis is referring to in “profound *interior* conversion”. Intrinsic motivation is sustainable energy and passion that drives behaviour satisfied by internal rather than external rewards. The behaviour is its own reward. Alignment of belief (of self, others, the world), thought, and behaviour provides the profoundness and enables the lofty commitment that often is not found in externally motivated behaviour<sup>13</sup>.

An individual’s personality is largely comprised of their beliefs. Thoughts are value-laden. Values influence behaviour<sup>14</sup>. As such, the intrinsic motivational alignment of beliefs-thoughts-behaviour can also be represented as personality-values-behaviour. In their article, “Personality, Values, and Motivation”, Parks & Guay (2009) aim to clarify the relationship between values and personality “and how they might collectively influence motivated behavior” (p. 675). The authors looked at studies of personality based on the Five Factor Model of Personality (OCEAN-Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism) that indicate personality does have meaningful relationships with performance and motivation,

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<sup>13</sup> Regarding beliefs, Dowson (2005) says “[r]esearch thus far has demonstrated that beliefs about self (e.g., self-concept, self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-worth, personal autonomy), beliefs about others (e.g., beliefs about the beliefs and attitudes of others, especially towards the self), beliefs about tasks (e.g., beliefs concerning the purposes of tasks and the utility of tasks), and beliefs about the world more generally (e.g., beliefs about the nature of intelligence and the nature and sources of success and failure) all significantly influence the direction and intensity of motivation (p. 12).

<sup>14</sup> Feather (2005) describes values as trans-situational in nature, saying they pertain to “desirable ways of behaving and general goals, that vary in their importance for self, and that people use as guiding principles in their lives...[V]alues are not ‘cold’ cognitive structures but are intimately tied to our feelings and to our sense of self. They have a prescriptive quality about them, involving what is desirable or undesirable, what ought to be preferred or not preferred” (p. 40-41).

among other outcomes (p. 676). Values, which are evaluative and guide individuals' judgements of their own and other's behaviour, are initially inherited, change considerably through young adulthood, and generally remain quite stable thereafter (p. 676). There are ten value domains<sup>15</sup>, and for this paper it is of particular interest to note that the values of the domain "Universalism"—social justice, equality, wisdom and environmental concern—have been linked to environmentally-friendly decision-making and have been related to cooperative decision-making in a social dilemma (p. 680). Parks & Guay's study also exhibited strong correlations between the personality trait "Openness to Experience" with the values of both self-direction and universalism (p. 678). Based on their proposal that personality and values have different influences on different motivational processes, the authors created a model to demonstrate how personality and values influence motivation via the motivational processes of goal content and goal striving. From their studies they concluded that values are related to decision making, and by extension, likely also to what goals to pursue, and there is evidence that values impact behavior (p. 680). It's more likely that individuals will make decisions to pursue goals in alignment with their values (p. 681). Individuals with high self-esteem (i.e. more highly actualized) tend to persist longer at an endeavour than those with low self-esteem (p. 681). They noted that research shows that commitment to assigned goals is often lower than commitment to

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<sup>15</sup> The ten value domains as per the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values are: Power (authority, wealth, social recognition); Achievement (ambition, competence, success); Hedonism (pursuit of pleasure, enjoyment, gratification of desires); Stimulation (variety, excitement, novelty); Self-direction(creativity, independence, self-respect); Universalism (social justice, equality, wisdom, environmental concern); Benevolence (honesty, helpfulness, loyalty); Conformity (politeness, obedience, self-discipline/restraint); Tradition (respect for tradition and the status quo, acceptance of customs); and Security (safety, stability of society) (Parks & Guay, 2009, p. 677).

self-set goals, but that if “values are related to the goals that individuals choose to pursue independently, they may also be related to commitment to goals set by others” (p. 682).

This study by Parks & Guay is relevant to this essay in that it provides evidence of the relationships between personality types, value domains, and motivated behaviour, complex as it may be, and how certain personalities correlate more strongly with certain values than others. It underscores the power of alignment of beliefs (personality), thoughts (values) and behaviour (motivated activity). In the study mentioned in the Introduction regarding what influences young Americans to take social action, Derrick (2019) said that the most successful personal journeys from awareness to action typically involve an *issue that strikes a personal chord with individuals* (n.p.) (my emphasis). Bron Taylor (2005), speaking in the context of environmental ethics, suggests likewise, noting research indicates there is not a close correlation between environmental attitudes and behaviours no matter the level of concern *unless an environmental issue is linked directly to personal concerns* (my emphasis). Taylor notes as well that positive environmental behaviour can also be induced if there are sufficient societal supports in place to mitigate the costs of compliance and facilitate cooperative action (p. 605). This speaks to external motivation, which, as per Parks & Guay, would achieve strongest commitment by individuals whose personal values align with assigned actions.

In light of the foregoing, it's my conviction that the intense motivation necessary to empower and impassion an individual to contribute collaboratively and cooperatively in undertaking the actions prescribed in SDG 13 is most likely to be effected when an individual's beliefs (personality), their value-based thinking, and their behaviour, i.e. their actions in contribution to achievement of the climate action goal, are in alignment. And this alignment necessitates self-awareness and authenticity, i.e. actualization of the individual. Siobhan Chandler (2011) in her paper “The Social Ethic of Religiously Unaffiliated Spirituality” says

“[b]eing part of the harmony...means being self-aware enough to understand one's optimal contribution. From this place, action is taken because it is personally compelling to do so, not because it is mandated” (p. 272). Her research and fieldwork that examine the social values of Canadians who describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious"<sup>16</sup> supports the postulation that “highest action is the one that is most personally authentic, not one based on obligation or duty” (p. 273). This empowering alignment of beliefs, values and behaviours necessitates self-awareness and authenticity, which are outcomes of personal actualization, or transformation.

Transformation that involves a radical change in the individual enabling their “highest action” involves a loss of the “self-centered, self-directed, closed-system self” and a shift to connectedness with that which is greater than the old self, with an “other.” It is a change from self-alone to self-with-other. In spiritual language, that other is the Sacred, the Holy, or God (Brown & Miller, 2005, p. 177).

In other words, self-actualization involves a move or paradigm shift from dependency to interdependency, to seeing oneself as a part of something greater, as being a constituent, contributing part of the global ecology. Self-actualization, requisite to enduring intrinsic motivation, I believe, is the answer to the question posed at the beginning of this section asking what is this “dramatic conversion” or “fundamental shift” or “profound interior conversion” that many speak of without an accompanying explanation as to how to effect it. Brown & Miller’s couching this paradigm shift in spiritual language evokes the overarching question of this essay: Is religion, or can religion be, an effective agent of change in individuals that motivates and

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<sup>16</sup>Chandler (2011) uses the acronyms “SBNR” for “spiritual but not religious” and “SDNR” for “spiritual definitely not religious”, the latter “borrowed” for this paper to represent the pole opposite the profoundly religious on the religiosity spectrum as discussed in the next section.

empowers them to maximize their potentiality and contribution to climate action? As evidenced by my research and experiential learning, agency of change (goal achievement) appears to lie in enabling, fostering or supporting the individual's alignment of their beliefs (personality) and ways of thinking (values) and motivated behaviour. Can religion do this? To respond to this, first a common understanding of the phenomenon "religion" is required.

#### **(4) This Thing called Religion: distilled into definition**

It's necessary to define religion for the purposes of this study as there is a bewildering and often contradictory variety of images and attitudes likely to be evoked when the word 'religion' is spoken (Beyer, 2011, p. 1). Paloutzian (2017) asks the question: what is 'religion' and its companion 'spirituality', and replies that there's only one honest intellectual answer and that is there is no best way to define these terms. "[A]ll attempts to state finally and definitively what religion or spirituality 'really is' have failed—across all disciplines..." (p. 10). Theologians from Augustine to Paul Tillich have defined religion in pragmatic, existential or transcendental ways. A definition or description is required, however, for me to put forth my arguments in this essay. For my purposes, I'm describing the phenomenon of religion relative to the concept of spirituality; I also make a distinction between 'religion' and 'religions', the former being my focus.

To help conceptualize 'religion' vis-à-vis 'spirituality', I reference a description given by Pargament (2013) who opines that spirituality "is the heart and soul of the psychology of religion" (p. 278). The author elaborates on this in a manner that resonates with my thinking saying

spirituality and religion have become polarized, as illustrated by the common phrase ‘You can be spiritual and not religious’ ... [It] helps to resolve this tension by conceptualizing spirituality as the core function of religious life [and emphasizing] that people can pursue their search for the sacred through non-traditional spiritual pathways, outside of well-established religious institutions and boundaries. (p. 278).

This relationship between spirituality and religion as presented by Pargament holds for my study although I speak of it using different terms. To explain the definitions and distinctions of spirituality, religion and religions pertinent to this study, I reference Figure 1 below.



Figure 1: Illustration of relationship between spirituality, religion and religions

The circle on the left represents what I think of as the aspects of a person’s holistic wellbeing. The four general aspects—mental, emotional, physical and spiritual—are not clearly delimited because the aspects are permeable, one influences the other. For example, physical exercise can heighten mental acuity; a spiritual experience can initiate intense emotion. Generally, it’s known that our mental aspect pertains to our cognition or intellect; our emotional aspect, to our feelings or expressions; our physical aspect to our material body. Our spiritual aspect is frequently less succinctly explained, often described rather unhelpfully as that pertaining

to our non-material aspect. The definition I attribute to spirituality derives from the root meaning of spirit, “to breathe”, something humans have in common with all other living creatures in some manner or other. All living things are connected by the breaths or other forms of aspiration taken from the same global atmosphere.

As such, my definition of spirituality as depicted in the middle circle is this: Spirituality pertains to the connection with something larger than the self. That “something” is unique to each individual. For example, it may be “the Sacred, the Holy or God” to use the words of Brown & Miller quoted above, or it may be Mother Nature, or the universe, or humanity, or community, or music. Scientific studies indicate the vital importance of connectivity for our holistic wellbeing.

The circle on the right is the same spirituality circle but now contains within it a very ambiguous circle called religion that blurs into the spiritual realm containing it<sup>17</sup>. The blurriness depicts the nuanced gradation between deeply-religious-adhering-to-an-organized-construct (DRAOC) and spiritual-definitely-not-religious (SDNR)<sup>18</sup>. I understand religion to be a guide through one’s spiritual aspect, analogous to a tour guide assisting a sightseer in experiencing a new place. In a similar vein, Paloutzian (2017) says for purposes of psychological understanding, religions can be described (not defined) as meaning systems that comprise orientations through which people

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<sup>17</sup> Concerning ambiguity, Beyer (2011) says there is a combination of power and vagueness in religion, and its “incontrovertible reality” together with “its seemingly elusive ambiguity” are constant, recurring themes in his analyses. His argument for a global religious function system that includes the contesting of religion and its ambiguous nature is, he says, a way of accounting for them (p.8).

Further, an article posted by Indira Gandhi National Open University states: “‘Religion’ is a difficult word to define. This commonly used word seems to have arrived at entire ambiguity in modern times, apparently reflecting the multi-ethnic and philosophically diverse global culture that we currently find ourselves in (*Unit-2 Problem of Defining Religion*, 2017, p. 4).

<sup>18</sup> This term and acronym are borrowed from Chandler (2011). The concept “spiritual-not-religious” is in common usage.

see the world and define their reality (p. 12). It's a generalized, abstract orientation that provides a sense of meaning or orientation (p. 22).

The essence of religion is guidance, or orientation.

The manifestations of religion into distinct religions, like Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism or Islam, are represented by the smaller circles orbiting the religion circle within the spirituality cosmos, some embedded in the religion sphere, others at varying locations on the spectrum between DRAOC and SDNR. To continue the metaphor, these religions are akin to operators of varying types of guided tours, such as through a museum, or the Holy Land, or a nature reserve, which may be tightly scheduled tours with a definitive itinerary (DRAOC), or go-at-your-own-pace tours using a tour app on a mobile device (bricolage religiosity), or self-led tours (SDNR).

Considering (a) the phenomenon of religion described in this section as a *guide* having varying degrees of flexibility within the realm of spirituality, and (b) the explanation given in the previous section of "profound interior conversion" requiring self-actualization (self-awareness and authenticity) for the alignment of an individual's personal beliefs, values and behaviours, does or can religion effectively serve as a *motivator* and *enabler* for individuals to realize their potential as an actualized, *independent* being well developed for effective interdependency? Or are 'guide' and 'independence' mutually exclusive concepts? It's beyond the scope of this paper to investigate the efficacy of the various *religions* as agents of change, but it is relevant to consider the spectrum of religiosity from DRAOC to SDNR in answering this question. The next section begins with this consideration.

### **(5) Religion as agent of change: maybe, maybe not**

DRAOC, in the context of this essay, means a religiosity characterized by deep devotion and strict adherence to the prescribed tenets and practices of one's religion, usually an institutionalized

religion. Movement in the direction away from DRAOC towards SDNR is often referred to as the individualization or privatization of religion, or bricolage. It's an individual's construction of their own religious package. As per Chandler (2011), there are often claims that SDNR constitutes an escape from public life, and that the associated values encourage self-enhancement at the expense of other-focused forms of social engagement (p. 151). These claims suggest to me that individuals at the SDNR end of the religion spectrum would be less likely to engage with others in climate action.

However, Chandler's study questions the logic and accuracy of these claims (p. 151). Specifically, her interest is in whether privatized (or individualized) religion produces other-directed forms of social capital (p. 166). Her expectations from her empirical studies were "to find SDNRs high in value orientations favouring autonomy (self-direction) and environmentalism (universalism), and low in those that either oppose egalitarianism (power), or endorse obedience (tradition and conformity). This is, in fact, precisely what the data show" (p. 288)<sup>19</sup>. As such, Chandler hypothesizes that "because SDNRs score high in universalism (94%) compared with tradition (38%) and security (68%) values, we should see high rates of concern for social justice and environmental protection" (p. 291) and notes that her "survey showed that environmental protection was the number one cause supported by my respondents" (p. 291). Chandler predicts "that since the social conditions [of globalization and tendencies to individualization] that reinforce solid spirituality are intensifying, the [SDNR] phenomenon will likely grow in the years ahead" (p. 316).

The findings of Chandler's investigation are significant in that they indicate that a person's individualization of religion does not equate to a reduction in their other-directed forms

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<sup>19</sup> Note that Chandler's findings echo that of Parks & Guay (2009) presented on page 16.

of social capital (for example, climate action), as commonly suggested, and actually indicates a positive correlation with involvement in social justice and environmental concern. If SDNR is, in fact, a growing phenomenon as Chandler predicts and as, likewise, I found in my research for my unpublished paper called “A Congregation of One”<sup>20</sup>, perhaps the predicted trend bodes well for addressing the social issue of climate change.

Individualization (or privatization or bricolaging) of religion is often associated with individualism, a social theory favoring freedom of action for individuals over collective or state control. I view individualism as an enabler of individuals to freely choose their own religion on the spectrum from DRAOC to SDNR. This meaning of individualism is akin to what Kelcourse & Ross (2015) describe as individuation: “our lifelong calling to express our true selves, with the belief that doing so not only responds to our individual need for meaning and purpose in life, but also best serves the greater good, broadly conceived” (p. 78). It is the life journey of becoming the person we were created to be (p. 83). It is the opposite of self-absorbed selfishness because, say Kelcourse & Ross, as we grow in spiritual awareness (individuation) we are increasingly able to discern God’s call for our lives, the vocation in which our gladness and the world’s hunger meet (p. 85-86). When Pope Francis said in *Laudato Si’* “[i]f we can overcome individualism, we will truly be able to develop a different lifestyle and bring about significant changes in society” (para. 208), I optimistically interpret this to be referring to individualism in

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<sup>20</sup> The complete title of my essay is: “A Congregation of One: Is the Rise of Individualized Religion Inevitably the Death Knell of Organized Christianity in Canada and the United States?” The December 2019 paper was submitted in partial fulfillment of the credit requirements for course RE693, Religions and Culture in Global Context, Wilfrid Laurier University. My study found that “[s]tatistics and scholastic sources point to the inevitable rise of individualized religion globally and, as suggested in this paper, specifically at the expense of attendance in mainstream organized Christian religions in Canada and the United States *as these organizations are structured at the beginning of the twenty-first century* (p. 17) (original italicizing).

the sense of me-first, i.e. self-serving for egoistical purposes; not individualism aimed at enabling a person's realization of their unique potential and their move from independence to collaborative and cooperative interdependence – in other words, their profound interior conversion in service to the greater good, in this case climate action. Is my interpretation of the negative meaning Francis attributes to “individualism” accurate? Paragraph 162 appears to confirm this; here the Pope associates “rampant individualism” with “many problems of society [that] are connected with today's self-centred culture of instant gratification.” Further, in paragraph 210 he says that environmental education has broadened its goals to now include a “critique of the ‘myths’ of a modernity grounded in a utilitarian mindset” and he includes individualism as one of the ‘myths’ together with “unlimited progress, competition, consumerism, the unregulated market”, obviously perceived as detrimental to “ecological equilibrium.”

Yet, Francis continues in the same paragraph to say that environmental education “seeks also to restore the various levels of ecological equilibrium, establishing harmony within ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God.” And this, I argue, is essentially the aim of conversion or interdependency: the pinnacle of individualism or individuation wherein a person is capable of empowering their authentic self for most effective interconnectivity, as previously elaborated upon. Can the Pope and the DRAOC religiosity he represents abide with, if not foster, the kind of empowering individualism I speak of that is the opposite of self-centredness and self-indulgence; or does the possibility for individualization of religion often associated with individualism, which is characteristically counter to authoritative guidance, preclude that support?

That question and the title of this section suggest there is not a black-and-white outcome to the interrogation of religion as agent of change. Narrowing the research lens to focus on the

question of religion as change agent and motivator specifically in connection with achieving SDG 13 still does not yield a yes-or-no response. Prior to beginning my research, admittedly I was leaning towards incompatibility of religion-as-guide and religion-as-change-agent for the actualization of the individual. Descriptors of the verb “guide”, including “advise”, “direct”, “show” and “indicate the way”, seem counterintuitive to an individual *self*-actualizing. Guidance is about telling, as in *Laudato Si'*, which *tells* of the way creation must be seen—as a gift from God, our Father—in order to achieve commitment to ecological sustainability. This telling relates to external motivation discussed in Section 3 that may not be inspirational to those who do not conceive of a supreme being in the same manner as the Pope, and it may not provide enduring, sustained motivation for someone who perceives the natural environment, not as a gift from, but as the embodiment of the sacred, or who has a purely secular view of the environment. On the other hand, this “telling” may be highly motivating for someone who conceives of God and the environment in the same way as the Pope. In light of this “telling” aspect of *Laudato Si'*, does the encyclical contribute to the commitment-sustaining motivation the Pope speaks of?

Capaldi (2017), in his critique in the Seattle University Law Review, describes *Laudato Si'* as “a laundry list of complaints without offering a serious, well-thought-out, and substantive alternative” (p. 1282). I suggest that Francis does put forth alternatives, but agree that they’re not substantive, not of a nature that would universally bring about profound interior conversion. The alternative perspective the Pope emphasises in *Laudato Si'* to motivate transformational change in individuals is, as alluded to above, to see the environment as a “gift” from God, as in “creation can *only* be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all” (para. 76) (my emphasis). The Pope also proposes a new type of “environmental education” that “should facilitate making the leap towards the transcendent which gives ecological ethics its deepest

meaning (para. 210). In introducing the release of *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis said to the General Audience in Saint Peter's Square on June 17, 2015:

Mine is therefore a call to responsibility, based on the task God gave to human beings in creation: "to till and keep" the "garden" in which he placed him (cf. Gen 2:15). I invite all people to accept with an open heart this Document, which is in line with the Social Teaching of the Church.

Although the Pope is inviting "all people"<sup>21</sup> to openly accept *Laudato Si'*, and he's attempting to inspire environmental conscientiousness with a shift in perspective to see human beings as caretakers of creation, I posit that his words may be un-inspirational and perhaps even demotivate those who do not conceive of a "Father of all", or feel comfortable with an ecological solution that is aligned with the "Social Teaching" of the Roman Catholic Church. In this regard, an example of a potential demotivator for some is the Pope's linking of environmental stewardship to the issue of abortion. In paragraph 120 of *Laudato Si'*, Francis asks "[h]ow can we genuinely teach the importance of concern for other vulnerable beings [in creation] ...if we fail to protect a human embryo?"

Elsewhere, the Pope appeals to a sense of justice as a motivator saying "we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate

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<sup>21</sup> The Pope appears to be addressing the encyclical to all of humanity. I've noted in bolded text instances that support this. In paragraph 3 he says: "Now, faced as we are with global environmental deterioration, **I wish to address every person living on this planet**...In this Encyclical, I would like to enter into dialogue **with all people** about our common home." Paragraph 14 begins with: "I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation **which includes everyone**, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all." In other instances the Pope is speaking to a specific audience, such as in paragraph 216: "Here, I would like to offer Christians a few suggestions for an ecological spirituality grounded in the convictions of our faith..."

questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (para. 49). Again, I suggest, this may motivate some, but not others.

My reason for saying this is that *Laudato Si'* will be motivational when and only when an individual's authentic beliefs and values are in alignment with the external motivator, in this case Pope Francis and the Church Teachings. However, my research suggests that motivation to action is generally most powerful when it's intrinsic, i.e. when an individual is propelled by their own personal beliefs and values. When a person's belief about their self in relationship with the environment and their belief-informed values lead to action or behaviour that is meaningful and purposeful to the individual, that alignment with core values will be more likely to sustain the “lofty commitment” the Pope says is required to achieve a sustainable ecology.

There are mixed thoughts on the motivating effectiveness of religion that is a “teller” (guide) by nature. Many scholars see religion (manifested into religions) as *crucial* to motivating behaviour. Dowson (2005) suggests that religious beliefs are highly motivational; in terms of expectancy-value theory they provide for highly valued and promised outcomes and an assured means of achieving them (p. 13). Maehr (2005) says religion “demonstrably has been, and remains, a powerful motivational force in the lives of many people (p. 133). Says Volf (2015), “world religions are our most potent sources of moral motivation and deliberation” (p. 24).

Others see religion as *conditionally* motivating. According to Schumann (2020), systematic study shows religion to be a “complex, multifaceted phenomenon” in that different religious concepts have diverse effects because of the different associations and motives that they call to mind (p. 36). Batson et al (2005) studied the prosocial motivation of extrinsic personal religion, where religion is seen as a means to an end, a tool for non-religious purposes; and intrinsic personal religion, where religion is viewed as the end in itself, a master motive. The authors

noted that in “study after study, extrinsic religion is not associated with increased helping; if anything, it is associated with a decrease ...[whereas] intrinsic, end religion is associated with increased egoistic prosocial motivation... (p. 175-176).

And at the other end of the debate on the efficacy of religion as a motivator, Johnston (2014), speaking specifically of religion and sustainability, says that the most convincing criticisms of sustainable development “question the utility of pursuing sustainable development through the top-down promotion of a globally acceptable ethic...Locally relevant values and knowledge are crucially important and should not, according to these critics, be diffused into a common ethic....(p. 74).

To Johnston’s comments I would add not only are locally relevant values and knowledge crucially important, but so also are individuals’ values and knowledge, and they too should not be diffused by a top-down promotion of a universal ethic, such as one promoted by the head of the global Roman Catholic Church. This is not to say that *Laudato Si’* has no value, or is counterproductive in promoting an ethos of environmental sustainability. Where my research has taken me is to a more fulsome understanding of why religion is and can be an effective agent of change *if certain conditions are met*. Psychology research shows that religiosity is positively related to favoring tradition and conformity values reflective of conserving the status quo, respecting authority, and adhering to social norms (Feather, 2005.p. 53). As such, if an individual authentically possesses those traits, they might very well be highly motivated by the Pope’s guiding words to assume stewardship of God’s gift of creation.

A deeper delving into authenticity, but beyond the scope of this paper, would speak to the question as to whether the values that the religious individual holds are authentically theirs or inherited at birth and unexamined. Suffice it to say that inauthentic values are not strongly motivational. Burrowes (2016), on the psychology of ideology and religion, notes “that a fixed set of values, myths,

ideas, attitudes, beliefs and doctrine ... become fearfully and unconsciously embedded in the child's mind" and are no longer easily or consciously accessible for review and reconsideration in light of new information or evidence (website *The Psychology of Ideology and Religion*).

To wrap up this section on the consideration of religion as an agent of change that fosters self-actualization, I turn to Tamney (1992), who almost 30 years ago, writing on the topic of religion and self-actualization said

[a]t this time research suggests that being religious is not conducive to having a personality suitable for pursuing self-actualization... The relation between religiosity and self-actualization will, no doubt, vary by religious tradition... Research suggests that people not affiliated with established religions are more likely to value self-actualization. But religion can also have an important indirect effect on self-actualization by creating societies in which feelings of security are widespread. This indirect role needs to be studied (p. 136).

And this indirect role has been studied. It's largely accepted that certain personalities who value, say, security, will be drawn to religion, and in light of this alignment, religion may best serve to motivate them to achieve their potential. I suggest that the conditions that must be met for religion to foster the profound interior conversation essential to addressing the ecological crisis, i.e. to enable intrinsic, individualized motivation, are: firstly, that an individual's religiosity is in the place on the spectrum between DRAOC and SDNR that aligns with their beliefs about their self, others and the world (their personality) and their way of thinking (the values they hold) and, secondly, that the values the individual holds are authentic—not an unexamined inheritance. I suggest that the apparent trending of religion towards individualization or bricolage is indicative of a growing societal prioritization of actualization of the individual for the purposes of enabling and harnessing its collective innovative, creative,

ecologically-friendly potentiality.<sup>22</sup> That is not to say DRAOC is redundant, only that individualization of religion provides a spectrum of religion options alignable with a spectrum of personality types to best foster an individual's paradigm shift from "I" to "we", to most effectively contribute to achievement of SDG 13 in collaboration and cooperation with others.

This claim, which has developed from my linking of research on motivation, religion and environmentalism (climate change), is theory-based and is lacking in empirical evidence. However, I believe there is tangible, albeit perhaps oblique, evidence supporting the conclusion I've come to in this section; it's in the form of religious or quasi-religious entities that reflect the demand for religion options across the DRAOC - SDNR spectrum that enable individuals to interdependently undertake climate action in alignment with their personal beliefs and values. Some examples are<sup>23</sup>:

- YECA: Young Evangelicals for Climate Change, for young American individuals who value their religious evangelical affiliation but whose personal beliefs and values prompt them to climate action not necessarily supported in their faith community.
- Green Faith: for individuals of any religious affiliation or none who, for example, hold personal values that align with the Green New Deal, a "bold and compelling proposal to transform the US energy system in a fundamentally new direction, fueled by values of love, justice, and compassion."

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<sup>22</sup> The concept of "individualism" is largely a "Western" construct. When discussing self-actualization, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs model is most often referenced; it is a depiction of the motivational theory in psychology comprising a five-tier model of human needs, often shown as hierarchical levels within a pyramid. This model was developed in the United States in the 1950's, and has been criticized for its reliance on "Western" individualism as opposed to more collectivist societal forms of organisation, and also for its [American] ethno-centricity (Bouzenita & Boulanouar, 2016, p. 64). In their Islamic critique of the model, Bouzenita & Boulanouar (2016) reference the MIT Nevis model, an alternative Chinese Collectivist model that eliminates the self-esteem level (pertaining to confidence, achievement, respect of others, the need to be a unique individual) and reorganizes the other levels. However, in both the Maslow and Nevis models, self-actualization remains at the pinnacle of human needs. The models are illustrated in Appendix C.

<sup>23</sup> For all four examples, the material provided was garnered from their respective websites: <https://yecaction.org/>, <https://greenfaith.org/#>, <https://catholicclimatemovement.global/>, <http://www.deepecology.org/>

- Catholic Climate Movement: for individuals who value the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and believe climate action must be implemented in alignment with the Church's social teachings
- Deep Ecology: although arguably more a philosophical system than a religious organization, for individuals of any religious affiliation or none whose personality, beliefs and values align with the guiding principles of the organization's platform to achieve ecological sustainability, for example, reduction of the world's population.

Direct empirical research is required to test the validity of my "oblique" observations, and in this thought I'm not alone, as I discuss in the concluding section.

#### **(6) Motivation, religion, environmentalism: standing at the intersection**

A scan of my research material indicates scholars' concern with what is *not* happening, at the intersection of motivation, religion and environmentalism. "[Regarding] the impact of religion on the motivational processes that direct thoughts, feelings, and actions...minimal attention is currently being given to religion as an important motivational force" (Maehr, 2005, p. 135). "[M]uch work focused on religion and environmental issues has explored the first dimension, individual perceptions and values, *assuming* that changes in such values lead to ecologically responsible behavior" (Johnston, 2014, p. 38) (my emphasis). Bron Taylor (2005) says

[s]ocial science has done a tremendous service to the study of religion and environmental concern, but it has failed to deliver the conclusive chapter to the story...Rather than assuming a close connection between religion, environmental values, and environmental behavior, any practical environmental ethics will have to go further than has been the case to this point to understand the connections between values and actions. Why are these connections apparently weak usually and in general, but in some cases apparently strong and directly motivating? (p. 605-606)

My study is an attempt to contribute to a conclusive chapter on the story of religion as motivator of human potentiality to best tackle the challenges inherent in the climate action goal of the U.N.'s Sustainable Development Goals. Johnston (2014) describes the traditional dimensions of sustainability as the “three E’s”: (1) ecology/ environment; (2) equity/equality; and (3) economy/ employment (p. 24) and suggests that a fourth dimension—religion—be added to acknowledge that at the very least religious values are important ingredients in defining and implementing sustainability (p. 28). He explains that this reflects concerns that a sense of connectivity—what I’ve suggested is the essence of spirituality—is crucial to effecting sustainable behaviour (p. 25).

I maintain this ability for an individual to effectively connect, is best—if not singularly—achieved by actualization of the self, i.e. profound interior conversion from the “I” paradigm to the “we” paradigm. Frequently, another level beyond self-actualization is added to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs<sup>24</sup>, namely the level of “self-transcendence”, variously described as possessing the attributes of oneness, wholeness, beyond self, helping others. I’ve argued that *if certain conditions are met*, religion can be an effective agent of personal change in empowering an individual to go beyond the self, to connect with others in achieving the SDGs. This “going beyond the self” is a characteristic of “Universalizing Faith”, the religion or faith held by people in the highest of six stages of faith development as put forth by James Fowler (1981). The webpage *Universalizing faith / Human Development / The Encyclopedia of World Problems* (2016), explains that people in this stage are “no longer stuck in a theological box”, they’ve “generated faith composition in which the feeling of an ultimate environment includes all beings...[and they are] ready for fellowship with persons at any other stage and from any other tradition.” Religion’s

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<sup>24</sup> Maslow’s “basic” Hierarchy of Needs is discussed in footnote 22 and is illustrated without the self-transcendence level in Appendix C.

effectiveness as a personal change or actualization agent, I posit, can be greatly enhanced with formal education to complement the guidance and motivation potentially offered by religion. I agree with Pope Francis in calling for “environmental education” that he said “should facilitate making the leap towards the transcendent which gives ecological ethics its deepest meaning (Francis, 2015, para. 210); however, I would not restrict it to *environmental* education. Rusu (2019), in his work on the process of self-realization, more broadly said it is important for contemporary education to integrate individual development work into its structures to foster self-realization and self-actualization (p. 1113).

Self-actualization and empowerment necessarily involve living according to one’s values and beliefs. As previously mentioned, Shalom Schwartz’s popular theory of basic human values conjectures that these values are: power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity and security (Parks & Guay, 2009, p. 677). Can an educational system aimed at enabling an individual to realize their potential in alignment with their personal beliefs and values, work together with religion as manifested in the world religions, when personal values are in direct conflict with tenets of a particular religion? One environmental-related example of conflict is the video series called “Resisting the Green Dragon: A Biblical Response to One of the Greatest Deceptions of Our Day” self-promoted at [www.resistingthegreendragon.com](http://www.resistingthegreendragon.com) as a “Christian response to radical environmentalism”. It claims: “[w]ithout doubt one of the greatest threats to society and the church today is the multifaceted environmentalist movement”. This religious view would fundamentally conflict with a Christian individual who holds the universalism value of care for the environment. When religion fetters or obstructs a person from realizing their authenticity, I suggest it can be demotivating and disempowering. Such conflict has negative implications at the societal level as

well. Van Cappellen et al (2017), on religiosity and motivation for social affiliation, note “despite their generally affiliative nature, religious people are not motivated to affiliate with those who disagree with fundamental aspects of their religion” (p. 30).

Standing here at the intersection of motivation, religion, and environmentalism, I see a need for further study into the potentiality of collaboration of formal self-actualization education and religion, and the prioritization of development and implementation of such educational programs. However, time is of the essence. Recognizing the direness of the global ecological crisis, the U.N. has set a very aggressive goal of achieving the SDGs by 2030 and implementation of new educational programs around the globe cannot realistically be significantly achieved in ten years. In the meanwhile, even if, as Johnston (2014) says, religion is not necessarily “*the most* important ingredient in the quest toward sustainable societies” (p. 30) (my emphasis), my research suggests that ubiquitous and essential religion *can be* an important ingredient in the quest toward climate action and sustainable societies *when it aligns with, and so fosters, the unique personalities, values and capacities of individuals*. In *Laudato Si’*, the head of one of the major world religions states: “Human beings cannot be expected to feel responsibility for the world unless, at the same time, their unique capacities of knowledge, will, freedom and responsibility are recognized and valued” (para. 118). I’ve argued that, conditionally, religion can offer this recognition and value—personal motivation and empowerment—and it appears that religion will be around to potentially serve this purpose for some time to come. According to The World Economic Forum, faith is on the rise as a global force (*The Role of Faith in Systemic Global Challenges*, 2016, p. 4). More specifically, Paloutzian (2017), citing multiple sources, says

“both atheism and individualized, noninstitutionalized forms of belief and practice have been on the rise...and we have an exceedingly interesting and complex mix of beliefs, practices, alliances, oppositions, and motivations to understand...[M]any

people are adopting a more personalized form of areligious spirituality in addition to or in place of a traditional mainstream religion (p. 9-10).

In light of my study, I posit that this increasing individualization, or bricolaging, of religion can be especially conducive to empowering not just the young Americans mentioned in the Introduction, but individuals in general for whom traditional mainstream religion does not align with and empower their authentic self to “continue on the awareness-to-action journey”; to address the climate crisis in a manner that is at once personally meaningful and purposeful and enables the individual to work collaboratively and cooperatively with others in service of the greater good. The individualization of religion does not necessarily demand a change in *what* is believed, rather it enables *how* that belief can be manifested in a manner that fosters the personal lofty commitment and unified action the Pope speaks of. I conclude, religion, as herein defined, can potentially be an agent of enduring personal change and motivation that empowers individuals to most effectually collaborate and cooperate in achieving the U.N.’s Climate Action Goal. And I acknowledge much more study on this topic is required.

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## Appendix A

### **The United Nations 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) to transform our world:**

Sourced from: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/envision2030.html>

**GOAL 1: No Poverty**

**GOAL 2: Zero Hunger**

**GOAL 3: Good Health and Well-being**

**GOAL 4: Quality Education**

**GOAL 5: Gender Equality**

**GOAL 6: Clean Water and Sanitation**

**GOAL 7: Affordable and Clean Energy**

**GOAL 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth**

**GOAL 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure**

**GOAL 10: Reduced Inequality**

**GOAL 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities**

**GOAL 12: Responsible Consumption and Production**

**GOAL 13: Climate Action**

**GOAL 14: Life Below Water**

**GOAL 15: Life on Land**

**GOAL 16: Peace and Justice Strong Institutions**

**GOAL 17: Partnerships to achieve the Goal**

#### **Goal 13 Targets:**

13.1 Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries

13.2 Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning

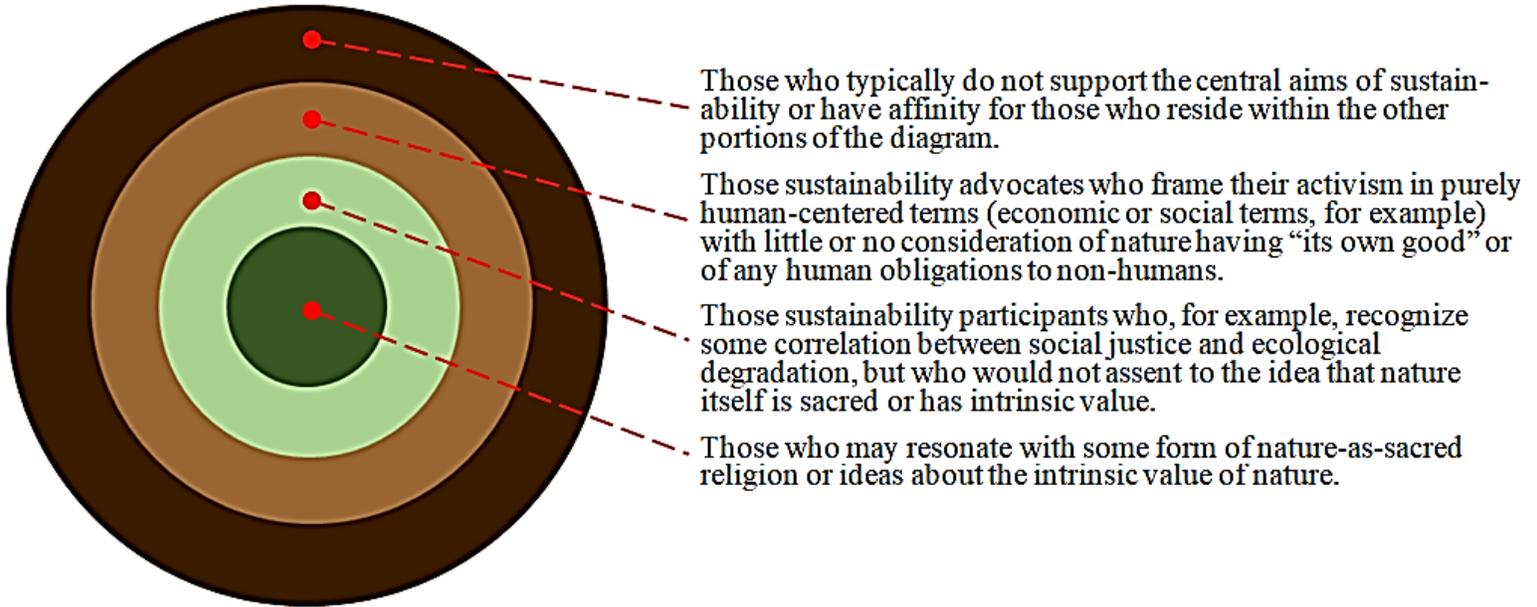
13.3 Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning

13.A Implement the commitment undertaken by developed-country parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to a goal of mobilizing jointly \$100 billion annually by 2020 from all sources to address the needs of developing countries in the context of meaningful mitigation actions and transparency on implementation and fully operationalize the Green Climate Fund through its capitalization as soon as possible

13.B Promote mechanisms for raising capacity for effective climate change-related planning and management in least developed countries and small island developing States, including focusing on women, youth and local and marginalized communities

## Appendix B

### The Environmental Sustainability Milieu\*



\*Image constructed from description (Johnston, 2014, p.31-32)

Johnston (2014) describes sustainability as follows:

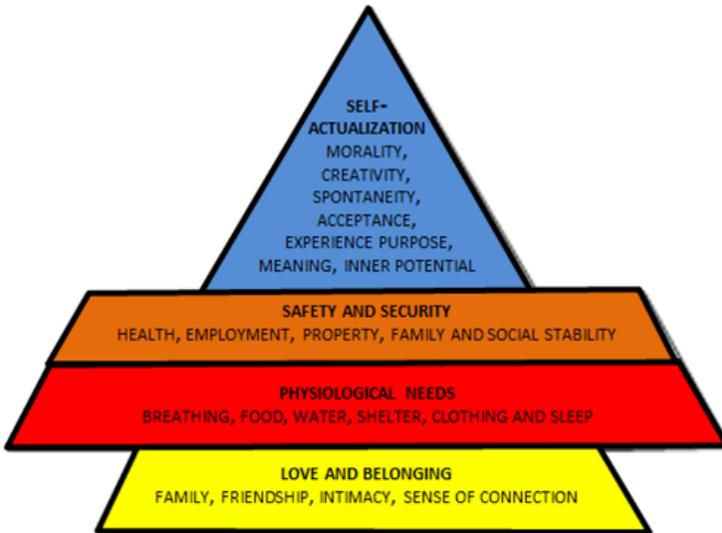
Sustainability is a strategy of cultural adaptation to the limitations imposed by the dynamic interplay of ecological and social systems, couched in large-scale stories that illustrate how to persist within habitats in a manner that provides genuine affective fulfillment now, and for the foreseeable future. It is not merely subsisting within ecological limits. Sustainability cannot, and should not be described as a concrete goal to be “achieved.” Rather, it is a conceptual device for connecting core (and often religious) values to community narratives, positing an ideal state toward which political processes, exchange activities, and social formations move (p. 25).

## Appendix C

### Comparison of MIT Nevis Hierarchy of Needs and Maslow Hierarchy of Needs

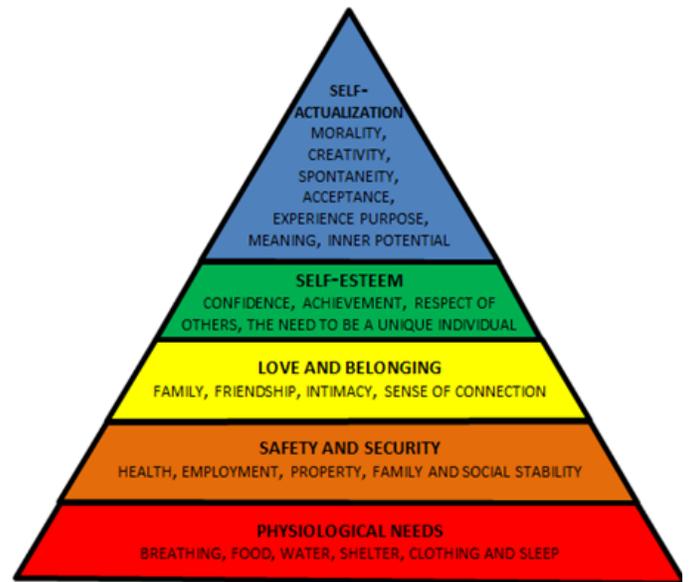
Sourced from <https://www.slideshare.net/elaineann92/mit-innovation-nodejan2018>

#### MIT Nevis Hierarchy of Needs



Chinese Collectivist

#### Maslow Hierarchy of Needs



American Individualist