

Spiritual References, Protest and New Environmental Movements

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Abstract:

This paper discusses how new environmental movements, such as Extinction Rebellion and the Sunrise Movement, use spiritual references in their political protest. The paper argues that these references serve both as a means and an end in themselves. As a means, they primarily serve to broaden participation in public protest and transform individual beliefs into collective action. As an end, they complement scientific narratives and underline the transcendental value of nature in relation to humans. With that, these movements indicate the limits of a secular discourse in the context of the climate crisis, as well as the potential for tensions between different conceptions of knowledge and spirituality in political responses to the climate crisis. To resolve these, the paper argues for a continuous and reflexive approach which honors these differences rather than eliminates them.

Note to the reader:

Thank you very much for reading this paper. It is still really more of a conference draft than a full paper, so I am grateful for all and any comments you may have at this stage. I look forward to the roundtable!

1. Introduction

Gail Bradbrook, one of the co-founders of the environmental movement “Extinction Rebellion”, claims that her spiritual awakening, induced by plant-based psychedelics, prompted her to co-found the movement: “I actually prayed for what I called the codes for social change, [...], and within a month my prayer was literally answered” (Bradbrook 2021). Since its beginnings, Extinction Rebellion has included spiritual elements in its protests and often invited religious leaders to join its environmental protests (Guise 2019). Interestingly however, Extinction Rebellion combines these spiritual elements with appeals to “listen to science” and demands governments to “halt biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025” (Extinction Rebellion 2024). Similarly, the Sunrise Movement, one of the US fastest-growing environmental youth movements over the past few years, have argued that they are waging “a spiritual battle against the enemy” and have incorporated the singing of songs as a spiritual tool for political action in their protests (Noisecat in Prakash and Girgenti 2020).

This paper discusses why environmental movements invoke these spiritual references. As a means, it demonstrates that references to spirituality draw on the writings of Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi to connect an individual dimension of faith and belief with the urgency to participate in collective action on climate change. As an end in itself, the paper discusses how spiritual narratives by environmental movements indicate a frustration with a secular and immanent frame of reference and the search for a more transcendental conceptualization of human-nature relationships in the face of the climate crisis. In this context, the paper notes that while references to spirituality can help mobilize political action and “span belief and realities” (Bender 2010, 17), they risk misappropriating and simplifying complex knowledge and belief systems for their political goals. Environmental movements thus illustrate on a smaller scale the

need to rethink secular democratic institutions to include a variety of belief and knowledge systems in response to the climate crisis, without misappropriating or simplifying these. The paper sketches out how this could be achieved through a reflexive and iterative approach.

The paper proceeds in three steps. First, I briefly situate new environmental movements such as Extinction Rebellion and the Sunrise Movement in the social movement literature, and define the meaning of spirituality. Second, I introduce and discuss how these new environmental movements rely on spiritual narratives in their political protest and strategies. I assess how these references serve to connect individual notions of grief and faith with a collective need for protest, but also represent a frustration with secular narratives in the face of unprecedented climate harm and thus bridge scientific references with ideas of spirituality. Third, I discuss these references through the debate on post-secularism and illustrate that the strategic references to spirituality can sometimes conflict with envisioning spiritual narratives as an end in themselves, as these may indicate the need to go beyond a scientific frame of reference. Fourth, I demonstrate that spiritual references therefore raise fundamental questions about the inclusion of different forms of beliefs in democratic responses to a changing climate.

2. Movements and Spiritual Narratives

In the 1960s and 1970s, with the rise of the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the environmental movement and others, a new set of social movement theories tried to explain the political influence of these movements. Scholars such as Offe (1985), Cohen (1985, 664), and Cohen and Arato (1992) for example argued that movements contain both a defensive and offensive dimension, while pursuing a self-limited radicalism to advance political and social concerns identified in the lifeworld. Specifically, Cohen and Arato (1992, 530) argued

that movements both preserve and develop the discourse and communicative frames in the lifeworld which translate into efforts to achieve institutional and structural change within civil society that correspond with these new normative meanings, identities and norms (Cohen and Arato 1992, 531). Today, movements remain crucial to both the introduction of new normative concepts and exerting political influence through the interaction with parties and political institutions. More recently, this influence has been described as “prefigurative” in which movements illustrate the possible construction of political alternatives in the future (Yates 2021, 1033), or as “avant-garde” which describes that movements movements push institutional and imaginary boundaries without necessarily replacing the institutional frameworks themselves (Ypi 2012, 5-7).

An example for this influence is the German environmental movement of the 1980s which, normatively, was marked by a rift between the more “radical” fundamentalists and ecosocialists and the more pragmatic and realist eco libertarians, but also contributed to the creation of the Green Party and thus pursued electoral influence (Kitschelt 1989, 109). New environmental movements such as Extinction Rebellion and the Sunrise Movement build on this tradition of environmental movements and continue to introduce new normative concepts as well as influence legislation, such as pushing for a Green New Deal. In contrast to the earlier environmental movement, these new environmental movements are defined by their focus on youth engagement, their rapid growth (especially pre-pandemic) and their global reach (de Moor et al. 2021). Additionally, they have contributed an emphasis on the need for climate justice, as well as the need to “listen to science” and, paradoxically, also spiritual references to the environmental discourse.

Focusing on the latter element in this paper, it is important to note that spirituality is inherently difficult to define and conceptualize. Mitchell (2016, 6) for example argues that spirituality is socially constructed and represents an “orientation to religiosity that is characterized by individuality, fluidity, and incommunicability”. Similarly, Bender (2010, 5) has argued that spirituality is “entangled in social life, in history, and in our academic and nonacademic imaginations”. In addition, Winter (2022, 14) has recently argued that Indigenous ontologies emphasize how “group and individual identity is forged within the relationship with the material and spiritual realms”. While the term spirituality thus, broadly defined, refers to ideas of religiosity that span different belief systems, to properly understand specific references of spirituality, we have to examine these in the context of the discourses and narratives within which they are employed.

In this context, it is important to note that if employed in the context of political protest, spiritual references often tend to flatten religious differences and simplify spiritual religious practices. While this can be seen as necessary to create a unifying narrative of spiritual protest, it can obscure different experiences of oppression and positionality towards the state (Braunstein et al. 2017, 11, 270). When analyzing spiritual references as part of a political strategy, we therefore need to account both for the discourse these are employed in, as well as be cognisant of the potential of spiritual references to flatten complex belief systems, and identify the political purpose or goal of these references.

Analyzing these different elements, in the following, I first demonstrate that new environmental movements employ spiritual references as a means to grow their support base and connect individual ideas of grief and faith with collective action. In a second step, I analyze the normative relevance of spiritual references and argue that they expand an immanent frame of

reference which is illustrative of a search for transcendental meanings in the face of the climate crisis, but which can also conflict with the strategic use of these references.

3. Spiritual References - Means and Ends

Critics of environmental movements such as Extinction Rebellion, have in recent years argued that these have furthered deeply "unsustainable politics", and contributed to stabilize the current order of liberal consumer capitalism rather than overhaul it (Blühdorn 2014, 150). In this context, Mouffe (2022, 12) has for example argued that "politics became a mere technical issue of managing the established order, a domain for experts". Importantly, this focus on scientific causes and solutions obscures the normative implications of environmental destruction (Scerri 2019, 130), and by adopting a techno-managerial vocabulary to express their demands and aiming for "best practices", new environmental movements have therefore failed to achieve real political change (Blühdorn 2014, 157). Assessing the use of spiritual narratives, however, complicates this assessment, as it illustrates the role references to faith and belief can play in both motivating individuals to join political protest and thus pursue collective action to address climate change, as well as the need to reconceptualize humanity's relationship to nature in a way that goes beyond a scientific assessment of the current state of destruction. Nonetheless, these references also raise a number of other normative issues, such as the just inclusion of different forms of belief and knowledge into political protest.

Starting with Extinction Rebellion, the movement for example routinely invites Christian, Jewish and Muslim religious leaders to their protest, and combines Pagan, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and indigenous spiritual traditions in their multi-faith ceremonies. Additionally, the movement references spirituality with their emphasis on achieving a "a change

of heart”, as well as the need for “self-love”, rather than a strategic vision of success to achieve political change (Bradbrook 2021). By drawing on these concepts, Extinction Rebellion has borrowed from Gandhi’s (1961, 19) concept of satyagraha as truth-force, which describes a movement that replaces methods of violence with active nonresistance in the pursuit of truth, where truth is individually defined but collectively pursued. Truth for Gandhi (1961, 39) thus corresponds with ideas of God, and is closely connected to the Christian theology of a law of suffering, Christ’s dying without resistance, and the power of active love and self-purification through active non-resistance. In parallel to this idea of suffering, Extinction Rebellion often performs protest actions such as funeral processions and grief marches that evoke religious images of sacrifice, pilgrimage and an impending apocalypse (Skrimshire 2019; Joyce 2020, 384)

Paradoxically however, Extinction Rebellion also refers to the need to provoke a “moral awakening” in at least 3.5% to act on climate change (and thus expressed a very strategic aim of mobilizing a large portion of the population). Additionally, Extinction Rebellion significantly diverts from Gandhi’s (1961, 29) concept of Truth as an individually anchored concept, as they often reference the need to “listen to science” and thus connect scientific authority to spiritual notions of truth. For Extinction Rebellion, references to spirituality thus allow us to confront an impending apocalyptic mass extinction event through a spiritual awakening which then informs “enlightened” political protest and civil disobedience actions, and which is meant to complement a scientific frame of reference.

To develop these spiritual frames, Extinction Rebellion’s REGEN (“regenerative”) working group focuses on the goal to build regenerative cultures that seek “deep and abiding nourishment” and build on the knowledge of “indigenous cultures around the world” to reflect a

regenerative action cycle that allows individuals to reconnect with themselves and their communities, as well as restore their relationships with the “other-than-the human communities” they are part of (Extinction Rebellion, Wellbeing 2024).¹ Other elements the movement draws on are neo-paganism and New Materialism with the aim of reformulating humanity’s relationship to nature which are inspired by the book *Dark Green Religion* (Bron Taylor 2009, xi-3). In the book, the author argues that especially in the environmental context, spirituality is required to restore nature as sacred, having intrinsic value and worthy of care, while cutting across traditional religions and instead building on natural religions such as animism and Gaian earth religion. Thus, these spiritual references serve to underline the need to not only revise our current political systems, but also reconsider how we conceptualize humanity’s relationship to nature and restore a religious commitment to caring for the environment across different knowledge and belief systems.

Considering the Sunrise Movement, organizers of the movement have also referred to their fight for climate justice as a “spiritual battle” that seeks to transform emotions such as climate grief into political action and structural change (Lears 2022). Learning from the Keystone XL protests, during which indigenous groups set up spiritual camps along the planned route of the pipeline and used prayer and nonviolent direct action to halt its construction (Funes 2017), the Sunrise Movement has sought to embrace spirituality and the singing of songs as a spiritual tool for political action in their protests (Noisecat, Blazevic et al. in *Winning the Green New Deal* 2020). The movement credits the power of songs to “unify us in ways that can feel mysterious, magical and sometimes even spiritual” (Blazevic et al. in Prakash and Girgenti 2020, 164).

¹ See graph in Appendix.

The Sunrise Movement also makes references to “sacrifice” to achieve environmental change, with the need for “millions upon millions of people making big and small sacrifices in service of the movement” (Blazevic et al. in Prakash and Girgenti 2020, 160). This commitment resonates with the civil disobedience literature and Gandhi’s concept of satyagraha as we discussed above, as well as the civil rights movement’s take on individual sacrifice as both a political and spiritual tool. Martin Luther King Jr. (1961, 43) for example argued that non-violent resistance can transform both the inner self and the other through evoking a moral crisis in one’s opponent and through the Christian concept of love as *agape* which allows for friendship to all men, including one’s enemies.

Thus, similarly to Extinction Rebellion, the Sunrise Movement builds on the concept of moral crisis and sacrifice, to transform the “fear and pain of the climate crisis [...] into a collective action” (Blazevic et al. in Prakash and Girgenti 2020, 148). Differently to Extinction Rebellion however, the movement does not reference ideas of truth and only draws parallels to the civil disobedience movement with their commitment to non-violence and their emphasis on their protests as a “spiritual battle”. Thus, the movement integrates some ideas of spirituality which extend their strategic focus, but does not emphasize the need to revise human-nature relationships to the same extent as Extinction Rebellion does.

Assessing these two movements, we can therefore see that as a means, they utilize spiritual references to broaden the base of support to include religious and indigenous leaders and translate individual emotions such as grief into collective action. Additionally, by framing climate change as a spiritual crisis, spiritual references complement a scientific discourse on the climate crisis and indicate a search for a transcendental interpretation of humanity’s relationship to nature. In the following, I demonstrate that these references therefore destabilize the

distinction between the secular and the religious and call into question the secular foundations of modern society in the context of the climate crisis, but that the strategic use of spiritual narratives can be self-defeating if they are used to further political inclusion, without allowing for the groups they draw from to enter the political debate on equal terms.

4. Post-Secularism and the Climate Crisis

To further illustrate how secular references exceed an immanent frame of reference, it is useful to invoke the debate between Charles Taylor (2007) and Talal Asad (2003) on the secular foundations of modern society. In his book, *Formations of the Secular*, Asad (2003, 39-42) argues that it was not until modernity that a conscious division between the secular and the religious was created, and religion relegated to the private sphere. Similarly, Taylor (2007, 545) describes an “immanent frame of modernity” as a change in Western society from being heavily oriented around God to a society which is governed by the belief that everything in the world can be understood by reference to the natural order. This reflects a nature-human dualism which conceptualizes nature as a resource to be exploited. In contrast, post-secularism challenges the idea of an immanent frame of modernity as well as the separation between the secular and the religious.

Assessing the use of spiritual narratives by environmental movements, we can recognize that they also challenge this strict separation between the religious and the secular, as they seek to complement or question the limits set by natural science and include ideas of transcendence in their protest and narratives (Taylor 2007, 548). More generally, they thereby challenge a human-nature dualism, as well as recenter religious references in the context of political protest, which undermines the characterization of religion as private. While these questions have been

explored to some extent in the context of Christian evangelicals and their highly varied commitment to environmental protection (see Veldman 2019, Veldman et al. 2021, Hempel and Smith 2020 for example), the use of spiritual references by movements such as Extinction Rebellion and the Sunrise Movement indicate a more general shift towards post-secular forms of protest across the political spectrum.

However, it is important to note that by including a range of different spiritual references, these inherently create the risk of misappropriation of religion and indigenous forms of knowledge for the purpose of political protest. Extinction Rebellion, for example, includes a wide variety of denominations of faith, as well as references to neo-paganism and New Materialism, and “indigenous cultures around the world” in their REGEN group and their protest actions. While this approach attempts to be inclusive of a variety of experiences, it also risks brushing over religious differences and simplifying complex belief systems for the sake of unifying political protest. Commenting on the metaphor of “encounter” of religious difference, Bender and Klassen (2010, 15,33) have for example argued that it imagines a “level playing field in which all religious actors and groups are similarly oriented in relation to secular forms”, but fails to recognize the complexity of religious differences and their differing relationship to the state. In the case of Extinction Rebellion’s protest, for example, these religious as well as indigenous groups are invited to participate on the terms of the environmental group to broaden the support base of the movement instead of the experience of these groups being genuinely centered in the movement’s policy agenda.

In a slightly different but related way, the Sunrise Movement has also been criticized for “tokenizing” indigenous members. In one instance, Indigenous activist Big Wind for example complained that they refused to be the “token Native” on speaking tours and that they refused to

speak for the experience of all Native people (Hirji and Brooks 2021).² This critique of tokenism underlines the difficulty of including a variety of different forms of beliefs and experiences, without flattening or misappropriating these for the sake of political protest. More specifically, these critiques indicate that the inclusion of different forms of belief and knowledge for the sake of expanding the movement's base of supporters can become self-defeating and unjust if they do not allow for the specific group to enter the debate on their own terms. This does not mean that movements should refrain from including these different groups, but underlines the need to critically assess how these are included and what this may mean for the political demands of the movement more generally.

This critique resonates with the debate around the inclusion of different religious groups in a post-secular state between Taylor (2007, 532) and Asad (2003, 6). While Charles Taylor (2007, page) argues that a post-secular state allows for continued conflict but also overlapping consensus between different religious groups, Asad (2003, 6) argues that violence and power are at the core of any established and universal principles in a state. This raises the question how different forms of belief can be included without reproducing embedded relationships of power and violence that continue to marginalize experiences that fall outside the universal frame of reference, and how this universal frame may be challenged and reconceptualized itself. Asad (2003, 185) for example argues that to redraw these principles in a more inclusive manner, a religious community should be permitted to enter the political debate “on its own terms”.

In the environmental context, we are similarly presented with the question of how different belief systems can be included in environmental protest but also reframe the political debate to transcend a human-nature dualism more generally, without essentializing,

² Similarly, Black movement members complained that the movement failed to actively include and increase BIPOC participation rate in the movement (Hirji and Brooks 2021)

misappropriating or tokenizing specific and often marginalized experiences. In this context, particularly indigenous scholars such as Dotson and Whyte (2013), Sherwin (2022), Winter (2022, 13) have discussed how Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies have been made invisible to political theory, as well as settler states' dominant culture more generally. Instead of aiming for some form of overlapping consensus on the terms of a dominant movement or group, we therefore need to recognize that we inhabit a continually shifting social space that requires the engagement of differences, but also includes the dimensions of violence and power (Brittain 2005, 161).

Commenting on the need to engage with Indigenous resurgence in comparative political theory, particularly Sherwin (2022, 49) has argued that reflexive approaches that “take as their premise the equality of interlocutors and proceed hermeneutically by allowing the terms of engagement to emerge from the encounter itself” are preferable for a decolonizing approach. This means that rather than drawing especially on indigenous knowledge to inform Eurocentric worldviews, a reflexive approach would ask to go beyond the mere recognition of difference and instead allow the “terms of the engagement to emerge from the encounter itself”. Importantly, in the process, scholars need to repeatedly “deepen their understanding of epistemic justice by recognizing the entanglement of research and knowledge production with other forms of interpersonal, institutional, and political injustice” (Sherwin 2021, 62).

Employing this reflexive approach can allow us to recognize the limits of spiritual references in the context of environmental protest. Particularly, it illustrates that mere strategic spiritual references may not be enough to ensure the equal inclusion of different forms of knowledge and belief, especially if these are invited to participate only on the terms of the environmental movement. Extinction Rebellion and the Sunrise Movement for example allowed

for criticism to be incorporated into the movements' revised strategic goals. Extinction Rebellion emphasized that their concept of regenerative cultures is constantly developing and adapting and can include ceremony and prayer "in ways that are neither dogmatic nor expected to find inspiration from things bigger than ourselves" (Extinction Rebellion, Wellbeing 2024). The Sunrise Movement also started a BIPOC Caucus to address wider concerns of tokenism, emphasizing that the movement is focusing on "increased development and investment in anyone who is being asked to take on visible leadership, greater training and shared definitions of what tokenization is and how it might show up in [their] press and communications" (Hirji and Brooks 2021).

However, going beyond these specific instances of critique, a reflexive approach would require for the movements to continuously revise not only their regenerative cultures or structures of leadership for example, but more generally scrutinize how they may reflect existing power dynamics and therefore obstruct or invisibilize marginalized forms of knowledge and belief. This could potentially lead to a shift in strategy and political demands for these movements, as an inclusion of different forms of beliefs and knowledge may require them to reposition themselves from complementing scientific references with spirituality, to integrating these two references on the terms of different communities whose ideas of spirituality they refer to. For example, Winter (2022, 6) points out that Western worldviews based on material, property-based and anthropocentric assumptions are incompatible with Indigenous worldviews that are based on relational, place-based and cosmological rather than anthropocentric propositions.

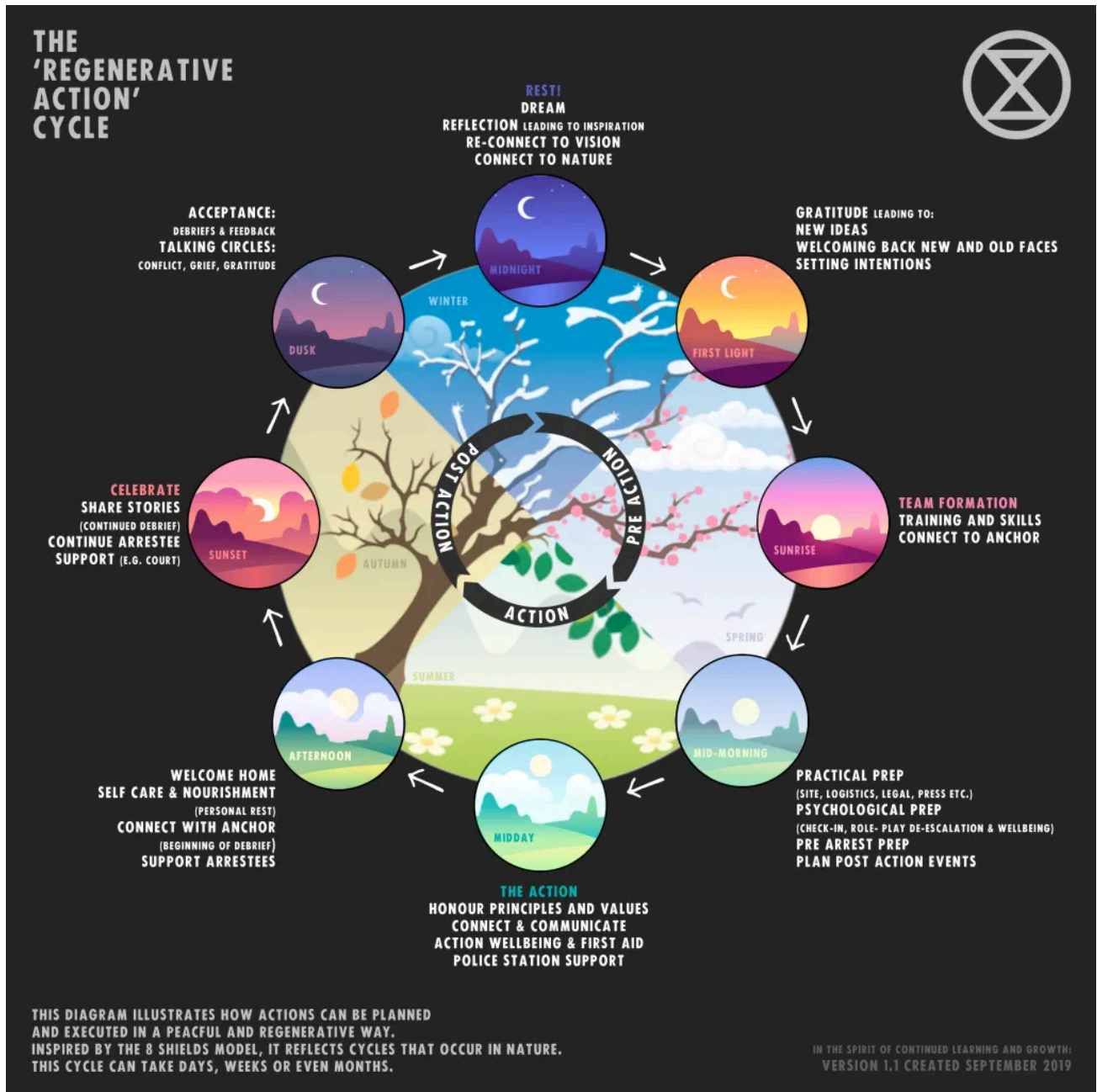
Engaging with Indigenous and other spiritual groups on their own terms could therefore indicate the need to rethink a science-oriented framework, while the specifics of any political

strategy would need to arise from the encounter itself. In grappling with these challenges, these movements are therefore illustrative or prefigurative of the need to continue these reflexive conversations on a broader societal level to include a variety of different belief systems in tackling climate change, while remaining alert to the potential to reinforce violent power structures and the risk of misappropriation and tokenization in the process.

5. Conclusion

Concluding this paper, I have argued that the use of spiritual references by environmental movements represents an underexplored dimension within the literature on environmental activism. I demonstrated that references to spirituality connect the individual dimension of grief and belief to the need for collective action. Additionally, they complement references to science with a focus on often marginalized forms of knowledge and beliefs. However, references to spirituality also risk tokenizing and misappropriating complex belief systems for the purpose of political protest. More generally, I therefore illustrated that references to spirituality prefigure a frustration with secular institutions in modern societies, as well as the challenges we encounter when trying to open these to a diverse set of knowledge and belief systems, and therefore indicate the need for continued reflexive critique.

Appendix



(Extinction Rebellion Regenerative Cultures 2024)

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