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Published online on: 27 Mar 2017

Accessed on: 14 Dec 2023

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The spiritual dimensions of ecosocial work in the context of global climate change

*Fred H. Besthorn and Jon Hudson*

**Introduction**

Global Climate Change (GCC) is the most significant and potentially disastrous natural occurrence to face the human species in the last 10,000 years. Its impact will be experienced by everyone, everywhere for generations to come. Indeed, GCC is the first true planetary emergency requiring a fundamental change in the way humanity comprehends its relationship with the natural world, as well as a change in the modern, economistic value system that has oppressed both human and non-human worlds. The challenges are daunting, but the opportunities are rich in texture and scope. Most interesting is the realisation that GCC is increasingly merging the interests of environmental as well as social, political and economic reform. The climate crisis has the potential to form the basis of ‘a powerful mass movement, one that would weave ... a coherent narrative about how to protect humanity from the ravages of both a savagely unjust economic system and a destabilised climate system’ (Klein 2014: 8). The question for social work is: what is our role?

This chapter will outline some of the salient features and consequences of Global Climate Change. It will look at the emergence of a relatively new arena of social work theory and practice – increasingly referred to as *ecosocial work*. It will describe the spiritual dimensions of ecosocial work and make some observations of how these might assist the profession in contributing to international efforts to understand and address the realities of GCC.

**Global climate change: anthropogenic disruption in the anthropocene**

The indiscriminate destruction of Earth’s ecosystems has grown to such an extent in the last 100 years of the industrial era that human-induced climatic disruption now threatens not only the viability of natural systems but, perhaps, the very survival of the human species. The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2014) is unequivocal in its yearly synthesis report, saying that the human species is the single most pervasive cause of accelerated and worsening climate change. This human-caused interference with the global climate or, what many call, *Anthropogenic Climate Disruption (ACD)*, has increasingly come to dominate the discourses of political parties, non-government organisations (NGOs), international governing
bodies and citizens around the world. As the sobering message – that climate change is real, it is now and it is serious – ripples across the globe, it reiterates the overwhelming international scientific consensus that has existed for well over 30 years that global climate change exists, is human-caused and is already impacting large segments of the world (Davis 2015; Hadley Centre for Meteorological Research 2014; NASA 2015; New Zealand Climate Change Centre 2011; The Climate Institute 2014; US National Academy of Sciences and The Royal Society 2014). Indeed, many in the scientific community suggest that the planet has entered into a new, human-induced geological epoch – often referred to as the Anthropocene (Smythe 2014). In other words, this is the first time in the planet’s three billion year evolution that human beings and their destructive activities have become the single most significant contributor to fundamental, and likely irreversible, changes in the Earth’s biosphere. Without immediate and sustained attention, global climate change may likely become the catalyst for the extinction of the human species. While controversial, a growing number of reputable scholars in a wide variety of natural and social sciences are beginning to acknowledge, at least the possibility, that without immediate action, human beings may be unwittingly in the process of causing their ultimate extinction (Baker and McPherson 2014; Hannah 2011; Hartmann 2013; Jamieson 2014; Kolbert 2014).

Global climate change: rising temperatures, rising tides, rising tensions

The list of deeply troubling ecological and social disturbances associated with Global Climate Change (GCC) encompasses a long inventory of pressing concerns. Several of the most worrying are described as follows.

Temperatures

Average global temperatures are on the rise. Twelve of the last 13 years were among the 12 warmest years ever recorded in terms of average global surface temperature. Worldwide, 2015 is on track to be the hottest year in modern human history (Queally 2015). This is no periodic anomaly given that 2014 was the second hottest year ever recorded. 2013 and 2010 are tied for fourth in the hottest years on record, while 2005 and 2009 rank fifth and sixth respectively (O’Callaghan 2015).

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2014) has repeatedly warned that average global temperatures will likely increase by up to 5°C in the next 100 years. Given the self-reinforcing and positive feedback loops associated with runaway greenhouse gas release, especially from the discharge of methane gas long sequestered in permafrost and deep sea beds, atmospheric scientists suggest that this unprecedented temperature rise could happen within the next 40–50 years if not sooner. The Earth’s average temperature has already risen by almost 1°C since the beginning of the industrial revolution, much of which is attributed to human industrial activities within the last 60 years (Stronberg 2015). This rate of warming is much higher than that experienced in the past century and is without precedent in the last 10,000 years.

The current 1°C rise in average global temperature is already having a profound impact on climate in terms of the duration and severity of droughts, violent storms, heat waves, snow events, flooding and other erratic weather patterns. There is now mounting evidence that grain and other food crop output would be seriously threatened by rising temperatures, particularly if the global average were to reach 2.5°C above preindustrial levels. Recent research (New et al. 2011), published in conjunction with a large international climate conference sponsored by England’s prestigious Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, strongly suggests that
a 4°C rise in temperature is not outside the realm of possibility at the current rate of atmospheric carbon infusion coupled with increases of self-reinforcing positive feedback loops. This would lead to catastrophic social breakdown and is completely ‘incompatible with any form of equitable and civilised global community’ (Roberts 2011).

**Tides**

One of the most perilous consequences of Anthropogenic Climate Disruption is the rapid acceleration of risks to the world’s oceans and fresh water supplies. Sea levels have been rising twice as fast over the past 10 years than at any time during the previous 100 (Gelspan 2005). At the current rate, global sea-level rises could increase by as much as six metres within the next 100 years, after having already risen by almost 30 centimetres in the past century. This anticipated rise would be enough to submerge major coastal and estuarial areas around the world and would put at risk nearly half a billion people (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration 2015). A sea level rise from one to two metres would be a final death blow to most low-lying island nations, already experiencing untold hardship as a result of current sea-level increases (Environmental News Service 2014).

The world’s fresh water supplies are also in jeopardy. Only 3 per cent of the world’s water is fresh and nearly 70 per cent of this is frozen in the ice of Greenland and the Polar Regions. As global temperatures rise, a steady infusion of fresh water is dumped into the world’s ocean basins from melting ice shelves, sea ice and glaciers. Antarctic ice shelves have shrunk by over 40 per cent in just 10 years (Environmental News Service 2005).

Higher temperatures and the corresponding sea-level increases are directly attributable to rising levels of heat-trapping carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. An almost 50 per cent increase in carbon dioxide levels in just the past 150 years reflects an increase that could not occur by natural climatic fluctuation alone (Dunn and Flavin 2002).

**Tensions**

No serious observer questions that ACD will result in severe droughts, intense storms, heat waves, crop failures and an unremitting cascade of both predictable and yet unpredictable impacts on the world’s biotic systems. However, the most immediate threat of global warming is the devastating impacts it has already begun to have on the social and political fabric of organised societies. These include the high probability for economic decline, food and water shortages, mass refugee flows, civil unrest, state collapse and armed conflict (Holthaus 2014). Combine the effects of climate change with already existing problems of global poverty, hunger, corrupt governance, religious/ethnic resentments and growing racial tensions, and the reality of vicious clashes over water, food, land and other survival necessities seems almost inevitable.

The current civil war in Syria and the massive wave of refugees is but one striking example (Femia and Werrell 2012). Climate disruption is implicated as a significant factor creating widespread drought and growing desertification of Syria’s once productive agricultural interior (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration 2011). This climate-induced agricultural crisis forced millions of rural peoples into the country’s urban areas, where long simmering hostilities coupled with overcrowding, unemployment and a general since of desperation lead to ethnic/religious factionalism, social unrest and, eventually, bitter conflict.

Syria’s story will likely be repeated over and over again as poor and underdeveloped regions of the world, especially in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, find themselves less able to respond and adapt to new climate realities. Africa, for example, will undoubtedly suffer more than
others. Estimates suggest that 75–250 million people will experience moderate to severe water stress as early as 2020 as a consequence of climate change (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2007). The decline in agricultural yields in this part of the world will also be significant. The consequences of years of record high temperatures, greater drought, greater evaporation and over-usage of freshwater reserves holds the high potential for increased incidents of armed violence. Mali, a country on the southern fringe of the Sahara, is just one of several examples of African countries caught in the chaotic and violent storm occasioned, in part, by precipitous climate change.

**The emergence of ecosocialwork**

Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, social work began to slowly revitalise its long dormant commitment to analysis and critique of those larger structural/environmental barriers impinging upon individual wellbeing and social stability (Besthorn 2014). A more expansive and holistic kind of environmental metaphor emerged as a counterpoint to an earlier generation of social workers absorbed in individualised and medicalised remedies for intractable social problems. This time, the professional discourse turned not to persons or environments but rather in recognition of both persons and environments – the interface of persons in their unique environmental contexts.

But, despite the rhetoric of persons nested in dynamic ecological interaction, the environmental construct continued to be narrowly interpreted as either social milieu or, if physical environment was addressed at all, as static background clutter. In the 1980s and 1990s, a small group of international social work scholars began pressing for an extension of the mid-twentieth-century version of environmental social work. For this new breed of environmental social worker, the profession’s conventional interpretation of its environmental construct prevented it from critically engaging in the emerging discourse of deteriorating global ecosystems. They also asserted that social work could not fully realise its ethical commitments to social and economic justice and service to exploited and oppressed populations until the profession thoroughly considered the inseparable link between human wellbeing and the wellbeing of the planet (Gutheil 1992; Hoff and McNutt 1994; Matsuoka and Kelly 1988; Matthies 1987; Resnick and Jaffee 1982; Soine 1987; Weick 1981).

More recently, a vocal group of international social work scholars from North America, Europe and Australia have begun to advocate for not only incorporating the natural environment into the profession’s theoretical formulations, but have been increasingly suggesting that concerns for the natural world must completely transform the way social work is conceived and practiced (Besthorn and Canda 2002; Coates 2003; Jones 2006; Dominelli 2012; West 2007). In many ways, this marked the beginning of a more radical, holistic and transformational ecological social work – simply referred as ecosocialwork or ecosocial work.

In the last 20 years, there has been a burgeoning of ecosocialwork scholarship on the interrelationship between the natural world and the theory and practice of social work. One ecosocialwork website catalogs nearly 350 conference papers, book chapters and journal articles contributed by social workers or printed in social work publications, between the 1970s and 2011, addressing a variety of topics related to the interface of the natural environment and the practice of social work (Global Alliance for a Deep Ecological Social Work, 2011) Since 2011, the corpus of ecosocialwork literature has continued to expand with an ever-increasing number of books, journal articles, special issues and dedicated conferences held at various locations around the world (Alston and Whittenbury 2013; Besthorn 2014; Coates and Gray 2012; Dominelli, 2012; Gray et al. 2013; Hessle 2012; Kwan and Walsh 2015).
The spiritual contours of ecosocialwork

In general, ecosocialworkers are committed to incorporating a deeper, more holistic and transformative kind of ecological thinking into social work theory and practice (Besthorn 2014, 2015; Coates and Gray 2012; Dylan and Coates 2012). A review of the ecosocialwork literature suggests a considerable number of thematic areas ranging from supporting grassroots ecological activism, responding to climate disasters, attending to environmentally displaced persons and applying ecosocialwork principles to therapeutic interventions; to name just a few.

An important dimension for many ecosocialworkers is the prominence accorded the interrelationship between spirituality and its critical role in informing the evolution of a deeper ecological consciousness. As has already been noted elsewhere in this volume, interest in the intersection of spirituality, religious, faith-based institutions and multiple forms of transpersonal experiences and practices have increasingly risen to a place of prominence in the last quarter century in the international social work arena. Similarly, spirituality has also begun to find resonance in this nascent field of ecosocialwork. Dylan and Coates (2012: 142) note that ecosocialworkers must understand the spiritual dimensions of the human condition in order ‘to link and respond to the interrelated realities of environmental and social challenges’.

In broad relief, the spiritual contours of ecosocialwork are catalysed in the ideas that 1) all species, including the human species, share a common destiny with the Earth; 2) the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things is both biological and spiritual and, when properly understood, they help locate a non-anthropocentric place of humankind in the cosmic order of things; and 3) there is no inherent or necessary separation between humanity and nature nor between spirit and temporal – the sacred pervades both in a reciprocal, unending and ubiquitous cycle (Besthorn et al. 2010; Coates et al. 2006). In this regard, Besthorn (2002) notes that humans

belong, from the very core of our physical bodies to the highest aspiration of our cognitive minds, to a constantly emerging cosmic/spiritual process. Humans emerge from, are dependent upon and shall return to an underlying energy or Divine presence pervading all reality. Nothing exists outside of this relationship cycle.

(Besthorn 2002)

In a similar vein, Gray and Coates (2013) have suggested several core assumptions of ecosocialwork’s emerging spiritual impulse. These include 1) a commitment to the idea of the Earth as sacred space and place; 2) the essential wholeness of the cosmic order; 3) the fact that everything is emergent – extending from the centre to the periphery of existence in reoccurring cycles; and 4) the interdependence of all things – nothing exists in or of itself, everything is dependent on everything else. Flowing from these is the importance of diversity and inclusivity – the well-being of Earth systems and humanity is reliant on a diverse and inclusive array of phenomena (biological, genetic, aesthetic, ecological, social, spiritual and historical) in humble engagement. Without diversity, life ceases to exist.

Gray and Coates (2013) also speak to the significance of the individual’s co-developmental trajectory. That is, persons develop not as independent, isolated egos, but as individuals linked and embedded – never fully comprehensible except in terms of their nestedness in the community of all beings. It is from the bio-spiritual milieu of our beingness in the community of all beings that we begin to transcend our limiting and egocentric worldviews and where creative and transformational action flow toward both the human and the biotic community.
**Spiritual dimensions of ecosocialwork in the context of climate change**

For those in the international social work community concerned with environmental problems, there is growing recognition that global climate change is fast becoming the defining issue of our time. A recent special edition of *International Social Work* (Drolet 2015) includes a number of important contributions seeking to help the profession better understand and respond to the serious realities of climate change. This adds to a number of previous social work scholarly contributions addressing dimensions of climate change (Alston 2013).

The spiritual dimensions of ecosocialwork can have an influence, in the context of climate change, in a number of different ways. From our perspective, there are several that seem most important – the **transcendence of resistance** and the **transformation of consciousness**. Spirituality can be helpful as people find, or, perhaps better, recover their ability to honestly perceive and to openly acknowledge the stark realities of climate change. Resistance to perceiving the realities of climate change can take many forms – from outright denial to a kind of passive avoidance that minimises the seriousness of climate troubles, while convincing oneself that it’s somebody else’s issue or someone else’s job to do something about it.

This avoidance may also involve holding tightly to a magical hope that some new ecowarrior or some new geoengineering project will arise in the eleventh hour to save us from our collective predicament. Whether a byproduct of fear, grief, helplessness, political or ideological hubris, or some combination of these, many in modern, western societies, still seem paralysed by this personal and collective avoidance response. The future of ecosocialwork’s engagement with global climate change issues depends, in part, on its skill in responding to this personal and collective resistance to thinking about and experiencing the overwhelming and seemingly implacable issues associated with global climate change.

Many ecosocialworkers are also convinced that until there is a significant transformation of human consciousness there can be no lasting alteration in the way humanity has come to understand its relationship with the natural world and no enduring action to address the escalating crises of climate. As with many Indigenous, Eastern and Western spiritual traditions, transformation is a key manifestation of the spiritual life and, at some level, spirituality is always about transformation. Indeed, in the absence of a transformational impulse, spirituality tends to become wooden, routinised and doctrinaire.

For many ecosocialworkers, spirituality is a necessary, if not a fully sufficient, condition for affecting personal and collective transformation (Dylan and Coates 2012). The transformational process is both a **transformation from** as well as a **transformation to**. First, it is about the transformation of human consciousness away from a modern Western worldview deeply entrenched in the social, political and ideological values of extraction, consumption, endless growth and incessant profit-making. From here, one finds an opening to an emergent eco-consciousness of connectedness and interdependence. And, from this inner transformation from the old to the new, consciousness flows an outer transformation in action – an active expression of peaceful and just action toward both human and non-human communities.

**Conclusion**

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the so-called Paris Agreement, issued a 31-page non-binding agreement on action plans to avert global climate disaster. The final wording of the COP21 accord, adopted on 12 December 2015, was endorsed by all 195 participating countries. It has brought renewed hope that the international
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community has developed a framework that has a chance to meaningfully address the problem of anthropogenic climate disruption.

Unfortunately, in the midst of an enhanced optimism, many critics have said that COP21 does not go far enough. Some point to the non-binding nature of its proposals and the fact that limiting average global temperature increase to 2°C is unrealistic – considering that even if global emissions were to be reduced to zero immediately, global temperature would still likely rise above the 2°C cutoff. In more strident tones, other critics suggest the COP21 accord cannot succeed because it does not address or challenge the underlying assumptions and values of the neo-liberal, capitalist economic system that has been indicted as largely responsible for the calamitous state of the global climate in the first place. They maintain that until global societies, particularly in the rich, Western world, transform their blind belief in the logic of triumphant capitalism, robust response to the climate crisis will never be powerful enough or, under current dire circumstances, fast enough to keep warming below cataclysmic levels.

Ecosocialworkers are convinced that the international social work community must play a larger role in addressing GCC. For many of us, the global climate change predicament is, at important levels, a crisis of spirit that requires a spiritually informed transformation of deeply embedded values, attitudes, beliefs and worldviews glorifying greed, selfish individualism and profit over any other form of collective social organisation and communal association. Change on the outside is never fully possible until there is transformation on the inside. The spiritual contours of ecosocialwork offer one small thread to a larger tapestry of global dissent, protest and lasting change in the context of Global Climate Change.

References


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