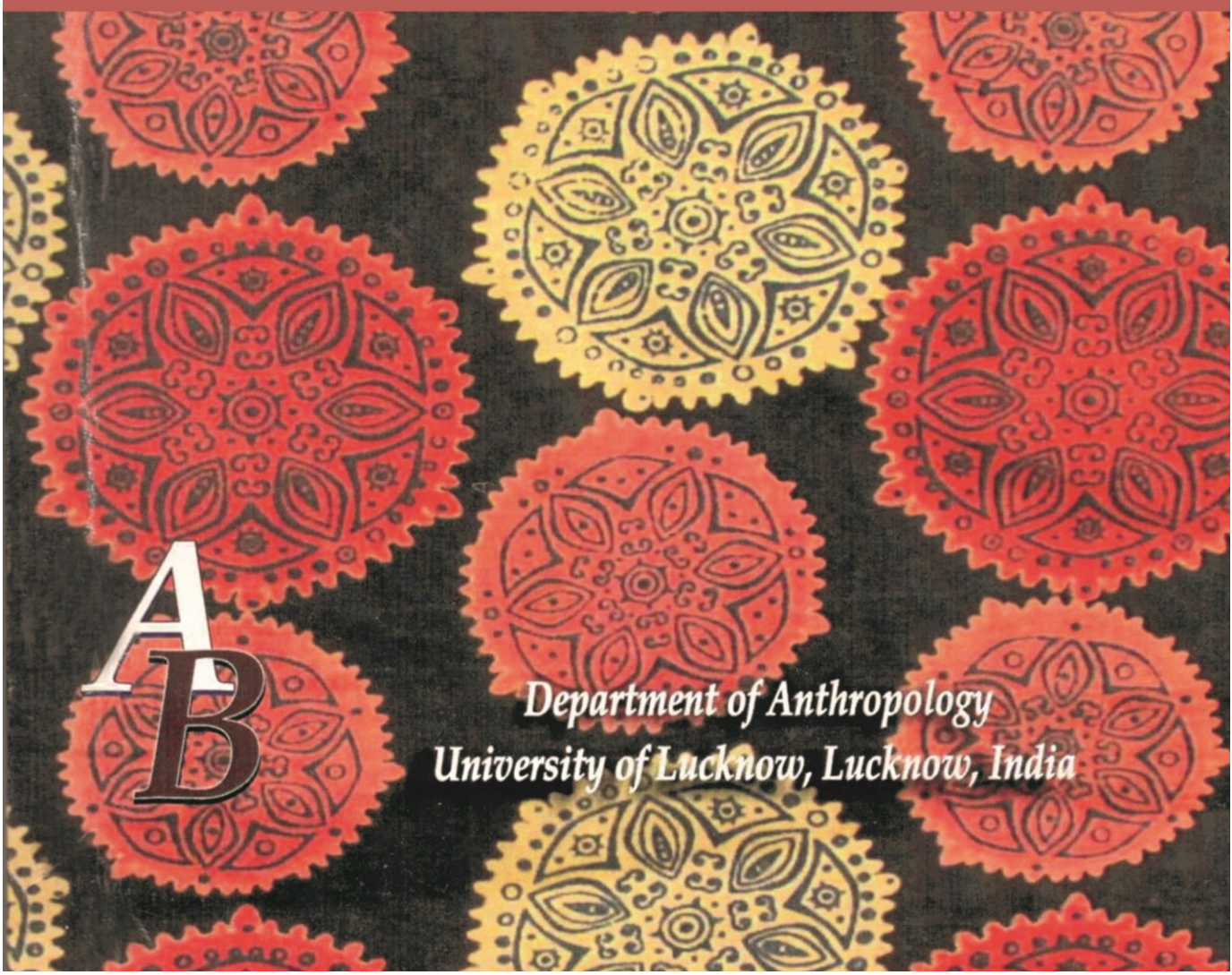


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Ecological Belonging and Everyday Spirituality: a Study of Lived Religion in the Swedish Program 12 steps to Global Wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary ecological crisis has intensified scholarly interest in the intersections of spirituality, wellbeing, and environmental responsibility. This study examines the Swedish transformation program 12 Steps to Global Wellbeing through the theoretical lenses of lived religion, ecological spirituality, and relational wellbeing. Employing a qualitative textual analysis, the research explores how the program constructs meanings of human–nature relationships, responsibility, belonging, and transformative action in response to ecological challenges. Drawing on the works of Nancy Ammerman, Robert Orsi, Vandana Shiva, and Karma Ura, the study investigates how spiritual and ethical meanings emerge beyond traditional religious institutions and become embedded in everyday practices and experiences. The findings reveal that the program reframes ecological crisis as a manifestation of relational disconnection and promotes a holistic model of wellbeing grounded in interdependence among individuals, communities, and the more-than-human world. Transformation is conceptualized not merely as personal change but as a collective and ecological process supported through reflection, dialogue, vulnerability, and co-creative engagement. The study argues that the program represents a contemporary expression of lived religion, offering an alternative framework for meaning-making and ecological responsibility in secular societies. By linking existential concerns with environmental awareness, it contributes to broader interdisciplinary discussions on spirituality, sustainability, and human flourishing in an era of global ecological uncertainty.

Keywords: Lived Religion; Ecological Spirituality; Relational Wellbeing; Ecological Belonging.

Introduction

The accelerating climate crisis has generated not only ecological and political challenges but also existential questions about the human sense of identity, responsibility and belonging. In many contemporary contexts the traditional understanding of the role of humanity in relation to nature has been increasingly questioned.

The environmental crisis exposes severe limitations of anthropocentric worldviews and growth-oriented models for development. As a response to this, new forms of meaning-making and ethical reflection are emerging within as well as beyond established religious frameworks.

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Within the field of lived religion, it has been observed that contemporary spirituality often finds its expression through everyday practices and experiences, rather than through formal doctrines (Ammerman, 2013; Orsi, 1985). In Sweden, as in other secularized contexts, spiritual life often occurs outside of traditional religious settings. In this development, nature has become an increasingly significant arena for existential reflection and experiences of belonging (Thurfjell, 2020). This kind of development raises questions concerning how modern individuals and communities construct ethical and spiritual responses to the ecological crisis.

In this article I will examine an example of such meaning-making through an analysis of the Swedish transformation program *12 Steps to Global Wellbeing* disseminated through an online course and educational material building on an ecologically adapted version of the traditional 12 Steps program for Alcoholics Anonymous (Rosengren 2017). The program has been further developed in dialogue with its practitioners, in a context of ecological concern, recovery traditions and wellbeing-oriented social innovation, seeking to support individual, organizational and societal transformation through a structured process of reflection and practice. Inspired by recovery movements, Theory U and Gross National Happiness (GNH), the program provides an integrated framework for addressing ecological, social and existential challenges.

This article's objective is not to assess the effectiveness of the program, but rather to investigate how it shapes and communicates understandings of humanity, nature, wellbeing and transformation. More precisely, the study inquires how the material portrays responsibility, relational belonging and spiritual meaning within the context of contemporary ecological crisis.

The analysis is located within the multifaceted domains of lived religion, practical theology and ecological considerations. Particular emphasis is placed on how the text handles the dynamics between human beings and the more-than-human world and on how it conceptualizes transformation as both an individual and collective process. In dialogue with scholars like Nancy Ammerman and Robert Orsi alongside ecological thinkers such as Vandana Shiva and Karma Ura, the article delves into whether the *12 Steps to Global Wellbeing* can be seen as a modern interpretation of ecological spirituality and lived religion.

Rather than questioning if the program should be categorized as religious, the article explores how religious and spiritual meaning manifests within the text, through its narratives and ethical orientation. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing discussions about the evolving forms of lived religion, wellbeing and ecological consciousness.

Theoretical Background: Lived Religion, Ecological Spirituality and Relational Wellbeing

The present study draws upon the interdisciplinary field of lived religion, redirecting focus from official beliefs and institutional structures toward how religion is expressed, practiced and encountered in daily life. Rather than focusing primarily on religion as a set of beliefs, scholars of lived religion highlight how meaning is generated through common practices, relationships, material objects and social interactions (Ammerman, 2013; Orsi, 1985).

According to Nancy Ammerman (2013) spirituality emerges through ordinary narratives, relationships and daily routines rather than exclusively through institutional religious participation. Rituals, relationships, and embodied experiences frequently convey religious meanings beyond explicit theological discourse. Robert Orsi (1985) similarly highlights how the sacred and the ordinary are deeply intertwined. Orsi illustrates through his research that religious practices frequently take place outside formal institutional structures, embedded in family life, local communities and ordinary everyday practices.

An additional and alternative perspective on contemporary meaning-making is also offered by ecological spirituality, that highlights the interconnectedness of humanity and the rest of nature. In this way it challenges anthropocentric assumptions about humanity being superior to nature. Instead of understanding nature as a resource for humanity to use, the perspective of ecological spirituality brings in notions of relational belonging, mutual dependence and participation in a wider ecological community.

One scholar who has contributed in a significant way to this perspective is Vandana Shiva (1988; 2015), who questions prevailing development models, which are based on economic theories, human separation from and control over nature. She instead argues that nature is inherently intertwined with human life. Interdependence, diversity and ecological responsibility are guiding principles for Shiva's idea of a contemporary spiritual response to environmental crisis. Although her theories are rooted in an Indian context, they have had a global impact on dialogues around alternative and sustainable visions of wellbeing.

Karma Ura offers another alternative perspective through the GNH framework, that has been practiced in Bhutan. Together with his colleagues, Ura argues (2012; 2017) that measures of wellbeing should not only be based on economic welfare. Equally important are other values such as inner and physical wellbeing, time use, culture, education, participation in society, good governance and ecological balance. GNH forms the foundation of Bhutanese national governance, thus challenging the traditional GDP. In this way GNH provides a view of wellbeing where the wellbeing of humanity is inherently connected to the wellbeing of society and nature.

These three theoretical perspectives together form a structure for exploring how meaning-making is formed in the material 12 Steps to Global Wellbeing. Lived religion brings in an ethically informed spirituality that moves beyond traditional religious institutions, while ecological spirituality offers a view of humanity and nature being closely interconnected. The GNH model offers a view of wellbeing that extends economic and connects personal growth to societal and ecological wellbeing.

Through these three interpretative lenses, the material may be analysed as a method not merely for individual development or sustainability, but as an expression of a contemporary cultural movement toward relational interconnectedness between humanity and nature, in times of ecological change.

Methodology

The present study is an analysis of the textual material that is used within the program 12 Steps to Global Wellbeing, with a specific focus on human wellbeing, meaning-making and ecological awareness.

Rather than evaluating the program's results, the purpose is to explore how the material negotiates individual and collective transformation. The focus is on recurring themes in the material, regarding wellbeing, responsibility and the role of humanity in relation to the more-than-human world. In the analysis, the material is seen as a cultural text, where these themes are expressed.

The aim is not to evaluate the effectiveness of the program, but rather to discover how the ideas of transformation and ecological interconnectedness are expressed. The analysis is influenced by lived religion, ecological spirituality and models for global wellbeing.

The 12 Steps to Global Wellbeing program: A Textual Analysis of Ecological Transformation

The primary subject for the analysis in this study is the textual material connected to the program 12 Steps to Global Wellbeing. This material offers a structured approach to individual as well as societal and ecological transformation. Inspired by the principles of

traditional 12-Step recovery programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, this program reformulates the steps and thus expands the notion of recovery beyond individual addictions toward an understanding of unsustainable ecological and social lifestyles described in the material as expressions of *global self-harm*.

The text thus suggests that transformation, rather than being just an individual shift, involves a process that includes the relationships between people, communities and the wider ecological world. An example of this can be seen through the inclusion of a project within the process, which is meant to be larger than individual components, and integrated into transformation. In this manner, groups, and possibly even ecosystems participate in the programs process as co-creators, in addition to individuals.

The adjusted version of the 12 Steps is, together with Otto Scharmer's Theory U, and the wellbeing framework Gross National Happiness (GNH) the three interrelated influences that the program builds on. These factors come together to form a narrative structure that views transformation as internal as well as external, systemic and personal.

The criticism of separation is a recurrent issue in the material. Ecological crises are frequently explained as the result of disjointed modes of thinking that separate people from the natural world and from one another. On the other hand, the program encourages a perspective on life that is grounded in relational belonging and interdependence. Human wellness is portrayed as something that arises from having positive interactions with oneself, other people and the non-human world, rather than as a personal accomplishment.

The material consequently challenges the idea of human superiority in relation to the natural world, by employing methods for self-reflection, shared dialogue and concrete steps for collective transformation and co-creation with the more-than-human world. This way, the program encourages a lifestyle grounded in ecological awareness and relational belonging.

Similarly, vulnerability is highlighted throughout the material. By acknowledging the frailty of human life and society, the contemporary narratives about welfare grounded in efficiency, individual achievements and material values is challenged. In the program, experiences of vulnerability are seen as a potential for deepening the understanding of our human relation with each other and nature.

Another significant aspect of the program is the focus on collective transformation. Through deep listening and co-creative dialogue, the process fosters a view of wellbeing where individual, societal and ecological needs are intertwined.

The program thus integrates components from recovery movements, environmental ethics and wellbeing into a cohesive wellbeing framework. A vision thereby emerges of ecological awareness and human existence as interconnected with the more-than-human world.

Discussion: Ecological Spirituality and Lived Religion Beyond Religious Institutions

The analysis suggests that *12 Steps to Global Wellbeing* can be viewed as more than just a framework for sustainability or self-improvement. Read through the lenses of lived religion and ecological spirituality, the material appears as a modern attempt to create meaning, identity and ethical orientation in response to ecological crises.

The reinterpretation of the role of humanity in relation to nature is one of the most striking elements of the program. Ecological transformation is understood as a deep change of worldview, rather than as a mere behavioral modification. The material encourages readers to move away from assumptions of human superiority, toward a mindset of interconnectedness. In this way the program is in alignment with the perspective of Vandana

Shiva, who challenges lifestyles based on dominance and control, and argues that relational conceptions of life are necessary for sustainable futures.

Another theme that is frequently found in the material is an expression of the lived religion presented by Ammerman and Orsi. The spirituality that becomes visible is of the kind that arises outside of traditional religious frameworks, although not necessarily contradicting them. Although not placed within a specific religious context, focus is on the experiences and practices of ordinary daily living, whereby the program handles many issues that are otherwise typically connected to religion, such as meaning, belonging and transformation.

This observation raises an important analytical question. It could be more beneficial to examine how the program carries out tasks traditionally connected with religion, rather than asking if it is religious. The narratives in the material aid participants in understanding both individual and societal problems. It cultivates communities of practice, shared reflection and transformation. It also promotes self awareness that places people in the context of broader social and ecological realities.

The program's adaptation of Gross National Happiness further strengthens this interpretation. The idea of Global Natural Harmony presents wellbeing as essentially relational rather than individualized. This viewpoint is in line with Karma Ura's theory that wellbeing arises from the interplay of social, cultural, ecological, and personal aspects of existence. Such strategy contradicts prevailing Western narratives that link economic development, consumption, or personal comfort and success to wellbeing.

Within the program existential issues are also reexamined. In many contexts, people no longer see traditional religious organizations as their main source for existential orientation. However, the questions about life and meaning, suffering, ethics and hope are still relevant. In relation to this, initiatives like the 12 Steps to Global Wellbeing may be seen as arenas for reinterpreting existential questions in new ways and contexts.

One of the significant roles of the program is therefore found in its potential for meaning-making. The text presents a foundation for this, based on ecological spirituality, vulnerability and relational responsibility. It provides a vision of wellbeing that is naturally linking individual happiness with a larger living environment. Consequently, the program may be interpreted as an expression of lived religion, establishing an arena for individuals as well as communities to process ethical and existential issues in an era of ecological change.

Reflexive Considerations

In this article academic analysis meets practical application of ideas. As the founder of the program 12 Steps to Global Wellbeing, I am upholding double roles, as both researcher and creator of the ideas in focus. This duality involves both potential and a challenge. The potential is a clearer understanding of the structure and the foundational theories of the program, than an external researcher would have access to.

On the other hand, this position demands that I be honest about my own perspective. The analysis I provide can't be completely unbiased, since the program itself was created by me. However, drawing from approaches in practical theology and lived religion, this personal viewpoint isn't necessarily a weakness in the way of conducting research. Here knowledge may be interpreted as situated rather than objective and detached.

The present study does not claim to provide an objective evaluation of the program, but rather a text-based interpretation of its underlying theoretical perspectives. In the future it would be beneficial to complement with a more in-depth study involving participant interviews and observations.

Conclusion

This article examines the 12 Steps to Global Wellbeing through the lenses of lived religion, and ecological thought. Instead of looking at religion mainly through doctrines, institutions, or formal beliefs, the study focuses on how existential meaning is found in daily practices, relationships, and lived experiences.

By relating to the work of Nancy Ammerman, Robert Orsi, Vandana Shiva and Karma Ura, this brief study shows that the program 12 Steps to Global Wellbeing, may be interpreted as a contemporary expression of lived religion, reflecting a larger cultural trend in which ecological issues are linked with existential issues, societal transformation and visions of holistic wellbeing.

From the angle of lived religion, one key point of the program is its effort to connect personal change with social change. Ecological awareness is not regarded as a theoretical subject, but rather as something emerging through lived experiences of shared reflection and practice. This shows how contemporary meaning-making may take place outside of organized religious frameworks, while still addressing the same type of questions.

The study does not imply that the 12 Steps to Global Wellbeing is a complete theoretical system. However, it suggests that the program may represent an example of how lived religion appears in modern society. It may be seen as a space for engaging with ecological issues while rethinking worldviews and reconnecting oneself, others and nature. In this way the material may be helpful in creating communities of practice, where new lifestyles may be formed, tested and shared and where spiritual and ecological questions may be handled in a transformative way.

Finally, this brief study highlights the significance of a creative dialogue between lived religion, research and ecological practice. In a time where ecological crises increasingly influence the world, it becomes more important to connect personal meaning-making with shared responsibility for society and nature. Such interdisciplinary dialogues may become interesting and necessary areas for future anthropological and theological research. The case of the program 12 Steps to Global Wellbeing shows that these issues are not merely abstract ideas, but real, lived experiences for individuals and communities searching for new ways to understand and sustainably live in an interconnected world.

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