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Citation for final published version:

Martinez, Fabien, Peattie, Kenneth and Vazquez-Brust, Diego 2021. Faith in the future: on a mission to integrate sustainability into management theory and practice. *Futures* 125 , 102654.
10.1016/j.futures.2020.102654

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2020.102654>

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Faith in the future: On a mission to integrate sustainability into management theory and practice

Abstract

This paper considers the future transformation of management theory and practice towards greater sustainability by framing it as a battle of competing faiths rather than logics. We apply the lens of ‘syncretism’, a process that describes religious faith interactions to understand the critical role of ‘missionaries’ and ‘believers’ in business progress towards sustainability. Using analogical reasoning, we argue that business missionaries and believers are characterised by varying levels of (1) sensibility to sustainability issues and (2) capacity to open themselves to ‘external’ idea systems and worldviews. The type of relationships that are developed amongst these agents may critically shape a firm’s sustainability performance. The article ends with an outline of implications for the future of corporate sustainability practice, research and theory.

Keywords

Corporate sustainability, missionaries, believers, syncretism, management paradigms, analogical reasoning

1. Introduction

The future of management theory is often framed in terms of the emerging information age (McDonald, 2011). It will nevertheless unfold on a physical planet seriously degraded by unsustainable practices in the past. Evidence of disruptive climate change, ocean acidification, soil degradation, biodiversity loss and melting permafrost indicates the reaching of multiple tipping points and a major disruptive state change (Steffen et al., 2016). A mutual existential threat is emerging, in which humankind's economic growth threatens the planetary life support systems on which we all depend. The resulting environmental degradation threatens us and our economy back.

Although many elements of the future (whether predicted or unexpected) will pose challenges for management practitioners and management theory, none can compete with the challenge of moving towards socio-environmental sustainability in terms of profound importance. In particular, management theory needs to address how the dominant 'business as usual' paradigm might be challenged and changed. Frederick (1998) argues that in mining for ideas about how to make management theory more socially responsible, the conventional analytical frameworks drawn from social science, business ethics and organizational science have become exhausted. He advocates for the exploration of new fields for applicable insights, including religious studies. We take up this suggestion, not through the usual consideration of values inspired by religion as a means to promote business sustainability (e.g., Rousseau, 2017), but by exploring a process of change associated with culture, faith and religion, namely 'syncretism'. The concept of syncretism is generally used to explain how particular cultures or belief systems collide and mutually influence one another. It refers to:

"... the cultural mixture of diverse beliefs and practices within a specific socio-historical frame; to the congruity of dissent within such a frame, despite differences of

opinion, [and] to the forging together of disparate, often incompatible, elements from different systems” (Lambropoulos, 2001, p. 225).

Syncretism has been used across disciplines including anthropology, linguistics, psychology, theology, and political theory and applied to a variety of institutional spheres of cultures in contact, including organizations (e.g., Lambropoulos, 2001), to provide theoretical foundations for new models of social change. In this paper, we aim to extend our understanding of how sustainability might become better integrated into management theory by applying the transformative lens of syncretism and its emphasis on reconciling or integrating diverse or opposing ideas and practices when more than one belief system (or faith/paradigm) are brought together.

The paper is organised as follows. We begin by framing the literature concerning corporate sustainability as a challenge of reconciling paradigms, requiring new and creative perspectives that can avert the dominance of ‘business as usual thinking’. The second part explores the relevance of syncretism to understand and progress the adoption of corporate sustainability, and the potential value of the analogical reasoning approach the paper takes. The third part unpacks the construct of syncretism by distinguishing between two syncretic roles: (i) ‘missionaries’ who preach a faith; and (ii) ‘believers’ who are preached to. Interactions between missionaries and believers are discussed as a critical influence on the way sustainability is dealt with in business contexts. The article ends with a discussion of implications for the future of corporate sustainability practice, research and theory.

2. Sustainability versus business as usual: A battle of competing paradigms

Corporate Sustainability (CS) represents a ‘collision’ between the belief system of conventional management theory and practice, and concerns for socio-environmental sustainability. It is expressed as the intersection of economic development, environmental

protection and social responsibility (Bansal, 2005), how firms balance these factors (Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2015), and the achievement of a stable equilibrium between them over time (Lozano, Carpenter, & Huisingh, 2015). Dyllick and Hockerts refer to it as: “... *meeting the needs of a firm’s direct and indirect stakeholders, such as shareholders, employees, clients, pressure groups, communities without compromising its ability to meet the needs of future stakeholders as well*” (2002, p. 131). Although, as a management theory topic, CS has been proposed as closely related to (yet distinct from) CSR, it is also suggested by some to represent the ultimate stage of CSR development within a firm (Kolk, 2016; Maon, Lindgreen, & Swaen, 2008).

Engert, Rauter, and Baumgartner (2016) in exploring the development of CS, argue that while firms often successfully progress towards CS at an operational level, the greater challenge is to integrate sustainability into management thinking in terms of strategy and, beyond that, social legitimacy. Their systematic literature review identified 114 journal papers that “*contribute to the subject of integrating corporate sustainability into strategic management*” (Engert et al., 2016, p. 2836). One notable aspect of these papers is that the identified drivers of CS adoption are framed in highly conventional management terms, including legal compliance, competitive advantage, cost reduction, economic performance, innovation, risk management, corporate reputation and quality management. Only ‘social and environmental responsibility’ represents a more ‘radical’ set of drivers, but even here the dominant analytical themes concern responding to stakeholder expectations and finding ‘win-win’ strategies that enhance competitiveness. Their analysis of CS literature ends with a call for future research to move beyond focusing on whether or not companies need to integrate CS into strategic management, onto how this could be done in practice. However, success in adopting CS is likely to depend upon its framing in comparison with the conventional management paradigm. To understand and manage this, a syncretism based perspective can be helpful.

An influential framing of CS as a clash of belief systems comes from Gladwin, et al (1995). They attribute the early lack of progress towards sustainability to the clash between two management paradigms: the existing, dominant ‘technocentric’ paradigm and its comparatively new and radically opposing challenger: ‘ecocentrism’. These represent alienated and opposing poles with neither capable of truly integrating human society and culture with nature. Gladwin et al. (1995) see hope in the emergence of a new alternative ‘sustaincentric’ management paradigm emphasising the inextricable links between socio-economic activities and natural systems. Despite its potential however, sustaincentrism remains a category – an ‘ism’ – that falls short of explaining the processes that will help management theory and practice bridge the gap between business and sustainability. It has been largely side-lined by CS(R) research and criticised as an ambiguously defined concept that risks the co-option of ethics by business concerns (Valente, 2012). Furthermore, the pursuit of a sustaincentric approach to business is not facilitated by ‘conventional’ management theories that tend to promote the status quo in management thinking (Allen, Cunliffe, & Easterby-Smith, 2019). Sustaincentrism may represent a path by which business and sustainability can become reconciled, but progress down it seems to remain tantalisingly slow for management practitioners and theorists.

Gladwin et al. argue that: “... *significant contributions toward understanding ecologically and socially sustainable economies, societies, and organizations [...] will arise only from new fundamentals, new languages and new lenses*” (1995, p. 889). One such new and emerging lens is the paradox perspective (Hahn, Figge, Pinkse, & Preuss, 2018), proposed as a means of accommodating potentially conflicting economic, environmental, and social concerns. The paradox perspective, and its critique of the reliance on win-win resolutions and a ‘business case’, seeks to move beyond an emphasis on business logic, towards an emphasis on values and identities. Hahn et al. argue that: “*accommodating conflicting personal and organizational identities and values around sustainability can foster change for sustainability*”

(2018, p. 237). They echo Fiss and Zajac (2006) in explaining that the coexistence of conflicting identities and values within an organization can drive cognitive organizational reorientation. What remains unclear are the processes that govern how such conflicting identities and values interact to maintain or transcend the sustainability paradox, rather than seeking to resolve or reject it (Vermeulen & Witjes, 2016).

The interplay, and potential clashes between, different 'worldviews' is a subject that has been studied in various contexts, including in relation to sustainability. The anthropologist Mary Douglas and her co-workers proposed four ideal-types of (conflicting) rationalities (or 'ways of life') that mould social interactions: fatalism, hierarchism, individualism, and egalitarianism (e.g., Douglas, 1999; Schwarz & Thompson, 1990); each with its own restrictions and levels of individualism and collectivism. Douglas's theory assumes that behaviour is fundamentally shaped by the extent of the social prescriptions that an individual is subject to: "a spectrum which runs from the free spirit to the tightly constrained" (Schwarz & Thompson, 1990, p. 6). 'Social prescriptions' are associated with varying levels of 'doctrinal' commitments that fuel diversity, contradiction, contention and criticism, and more or less actively structure the world in different and (in the right circumstances) complementary ways. Schwarz and Thompson (1990), later followed by Patel (2015), have called for a richer understanding of these variables, notably in order to help business organizations more creatively 'manage' CS(R), and move beyond viewing it as an ineluctable source of tensions between competing worldviews, bounded rationalities (or institutional logics) and accumulated self-interests. Although highly insightful, the work of Douglas and colleagues still presents the combination or conciliation of worldviews as a relatively rational process. Faithing processes such as syncretism provide an alternative and complementary perspective from which to explore the collisions of worldviews that may not be entirely driven, nor satisfactorily explained, by rationality.

With its roots in religious studies, a field that is no stranger to doctrinal commitment, paradox, diversity, contradiction, contention and criticism, syncretism has recently emerged as a potentially helpful alternative resource to understand and promote CS(R) (e.g., Berger, Cunningham, & Dumright, 2007; Martinez, Peattie, & Vazquez-Brust, 2019). Berger et al. (2007) identify syncretism as one of three viable approaches to CSR ‘mainstreaming’ (the others being a business case based or a social values led approach). Beyond this however, the potential relevance of syncretism for CS(R) contexts has not been seriously considered as a theory of reconciling paradigms. Also, although Martinez et al. (2019); and Berger et al. (2007) highlight the potential importance of ‘syncretic stewardship’ to achieve greater corporate stakeholder engagement (and by implication CS), they do not say much about the processes (and participants) through which it can be achieved.

3. The relevance of a syncretic perspective on corporate sustainability

The validity of applying a syncretic approach rooted in religious experience is likely to be disputed by those viewing the dominant technocentric paradigm as rooted in rationality, realism, science and fact. For example, standard micro-economic theory is essentially based upon ‘rational’ assumptions of perfect information and omniscient and costless decision-making ability (Kaufman, 2016). Barry notes a perceived “... *disparity between ‘dreamy’ environmentalists who question economic growth, and ‘serious’ others who are ‘realistic’ that continuous economic growth is a non-negotiable ‘fact’*” (2015, p. 8). Starik and Kanashiro (2013) observe that continued dominance of technocentrism in management fields and imperviousness to sustainability-based pressures resembles a religious faith in being intractable, enduring and resistant to change. Others go further, viewing economic growth as a ‘secular religion’ with economists fulfilling the role of priests (Nelson, 2001), or framing the pursuit of economic growth as a religious experience with its own sacred language, sacrifices and rituals,

and with Adam Smith's 'invisible hand of the market' representing the hand of god (Barry, 2015). Framed in this way, the potential exists for cultural and religious studies to inform our understanding of how managers meet the future sustainability challenge, since it represents not just a clash of competing business logics, but a battle between technocentric and sustaincentric 'faiths'.

A further clue to the potential relevance of religious perspectives comes in the semantics of the CS debate. Language denoting an idea system as faith-based, such as 'doctrine' or 'creed', tends to be used by proponents of one faith when talking about the other (Martinez, 2019). Leading thinkers on each side are 'gurus', and each side appears to believe they are the ones led by logic and evidence, whilst the other is driven by 'dogma'. Maon et al. (2010, p.31) describe top management's support in their final seventh 'transformative' level of CS orientated CSR as 'devotion', whilst Gladwin et al. (1995, p.896) refer to sustainability 'believers'. Despite the many clues that faithing processes are relevant to understanding the pursuit of CS as a form of cultural change, they remain understudied. In a similar vein, some scholars have explored how people at work have recourse to vocational callings (secular or sacred) to make sense of, and add meaning to, their work place (e.g., Kim, Shin, Vough, Hewlin, & Vandenberghe, 2018). While this can be inferred to reflect a certain level of interest in understanding how business agents relate to faith (in a way that may affect corporate behaviour), there remains a shortage of scholarly work that attempts to explicitly extend this phenomenon to the context of CSR or CS.

This article therefore explores syncretism, as an established approach to understanding religious change and faithing processes, in terms of its potential to bring 'believers' back in the study of CS phenomena in ways that can contribute to a paradigmatic shift towards sustaincentrism. The main objective is to articulate how a diverse range of actors in the corporate context relate to their beliefs about capitalism, firms and sustainability. According to

Lambropoulos (2001), syncretism is a model of integration that embraces conflicting expectations, allowing for cultural change to be driven by competing faiths. We propose that this model can prove relevant and useful in CS fields as an alternative to conventional approaches that rarely seem to rise above a win-win appeal to logic when tackling the tensions and paradoxes that characterise the links between economic, environmental and social sustainability concerns. Authors cited above, such as Schwarz and Thompson (1990); and Douglas (1999), support the idea that multiple paradigms exist and interact within businesses, shaping their cultures and behaviours, implying that we need to understand the processes of interaction and the change processes at work.

To explore syncretism's potential to better understand and progress the processes through which greater CS can be achieved, this paper applies analogical reasoning (Cornelissen & Durand, 2014). This method of analysis involves constructing analogical relations between phenomena that have no antecedents of theoretically and empirically established correspondences (Wilbers & Duit, 2006). Analogical reasoning is well established in management studies and has provided novel insights and influential theories in various domains (e.g., Clemente & Roulet, 2015), such as in the behavioural theory of the firm by drawing analogies between the human mind and digital computers (Cornelissen & Durand, 2014). In this article, we produce a conceptual representation of the source domain (religious syncretism), reviewing its key vocabulary, base assumptions, and causal structure, and transpose it to the target domain (CS). From religious and cultural literatures, we import the key constructs of syncretism (including its antecedents and outcomes) and create an integrated framework explaining how elements from diverse belief systems can co-exist and interact in the business environment to form a 'syncretic field' where a firm's readiness to engage in sustainability may be understood and influenced.

In its analysis, the paper follows the principles of Weber (1949) in constructing ‘Ideal Types’, particularly to explain the behaviour of actors within syncretic fields. Such ideal types are abstractions that accentuate in theory the defining characteristics of an individual, process, group or organization, rather than seeking to reflect their reality (Bengtsson & Hertting, 2014). It is an approach that Weber applied in the study of organizations (a bureaucracy is one of his most discussed ideal types), and of religion, where he used them to distinguish between ‘magicians’, ‘priests’ and ‘prophets’ as types of religious leaders or between ‘ethical’ and ‘exemplary’ as types of religious prophecy (Lynch, 2009; Weber, 1991). Ideal types are valuable in supporting the production of research hypotheses, allowing generalisation by analogy to other contexts, and suggesting options for further research to confirm a type or to challenge and reinterpret it (Bengtsson & Hertting, 2014; Weber, 1949).

This paper therefore has the potential weaknesses associated with using analogical reasoning in organization studies (Tsoukas, 1993). That is, metaphors may be misleading due to a lack of precision, they are difficult to test for the robustness of their ‘fit’, and they are vulnerable to being over-extended. Despite this, we believe the approach is potentially valuable due to its potential to generate new research directions and novel research questions, and because “...*the rewards may be higher than those likely to accrue from merely following conventional intra-disciplinary lines of inquiry*” (Tsoukas, 1993, p. 342).

4. Unpacking the construct of syncretism

Although most work on syncretism focuses on the fusion of religious forms and beliefs (Lindenfeld, 2005; Wagner, 1975), it re-emerged as a theoretical framework in social theory during the 1990s to explore the dynamics of institutional and cultural transformations relating to globalization, transnational nationalism and diaspora communities (Lindenfeld, 2005; Stewart, 1999). Syncretic theory sees collective social constructions (including belief systems,

religions, cultures and institutions) as porous and “*composed of an indeterminate number of features which are decomposable and combinable*” (Berk & Galvan, 2009, p. 545). Consequently they are open to intermixture and the borrowing of concepts and symbols whilst interpenetrating, hybridizing or blending with each other (Stewart, 1999).

Corporations are social constructions within which a permanent struggle for meaning takes place between multiple institutional logics (Besharov & Smith, 2014). This paper frames this struggle for meaning as a syncretic process that activates certain (more or less desirable and creative) pathways to value creation, somehow combining economic, ecological and social aspects of sustainability. Marquis and Lounsbury (2007, p. 799) define institutional logics as the “*broad cultural beliefs and rules that structure cognition and fundamentally shape decision-making and action in a field*”. Such beliefs and rules will include elements that shape a corporation’s commitment to sustainability (e.g., Schaefer, 2004; Swanson, 1999). The religious equivalent of institutional logics are ‘idea systems’ (e.g., Laibelman, 2004; Stewart, 1999; Wagner, 1975), and we seek to transpose into the field of business what can be understood about the way in which elements of idea systems (used interchangeably with the notion of ‘belief systems’ in this article) interact in a syncretic field to shape pro-sustainability paradigmatic change.

Cultural and religious studies identify that individuals, including religious leaders and worshippers, will vary in the intensity with which they relate to idea systems; may adopt different roles in relation to the key ideas; and may actively accept and/or contest encountered ‘foreign’ elements (e.g., Hesselgrave, 2006; Hiebert, 2006; McGavran, 1990; Meyer, 1994; Sanneh, 1989; Van Rhee, 2006). To understand these phenomena, a useful distinction in the syncretism literature exists between the roles of ‘missionaries’ who preach or promote a faith, and the role of ‘believers’ who are preached to.

In line with Droogers (1989), we argue that the claims made about truth determine how missionaries and believers react towards other idea systems. Some religions (e.g., Christianity and Islam) hold exclusivist claims to truth, which make their disciples resistant to the influence of other idea systems. Other religions (e.g., Graeco-Roman, Shinto, Taoism and Buddhism) adopt non-exclusivist claims to truth and are more willing to accept a plurality of routes to knowledge and ‘truth’.

We further align with Shaw and Stewart (2003) and Droogers (1989) in arguing that syncretism does not occur in a power-free space. Droogers explains: “*if power is defined as the capacity to influence other people’s behaviour, syncretism has a power dimension to it*” (1989, p. 16). Including ‘relation to power’ as a variable in our analysis will help us to recognise that some but not all individuals engaging in syncretism have the legitimacy and authority within their institutional, social or cultural contexts to select practices and beliefs, and to mould or change the context.

4.1 The role of missionaries

Missionaries are mainly concerned with protecting or strengthening the faith of members within their community and the active diffusion of faith in ways that either transcend cultural barriers or integrate with local idea systems (Hesselgrave, 2006). In the transcending function, missionaries represent orthodoxy, dedicating their lives to proselytizing and/or performing religious functions and duties to persuade individuals to join their ‘cult’ (McGavran, 1990). They view their beliefs as the unique truth that must be preserved and taught. Elements that are external to this cult are alienated, ignored or rejected, resulting in a tendency to impose a single idea system while neglecting other (less powerful) ones, a phenomenon that Clack associates with the “*interpenetrating mode of syncretism*” (2011, p. 228). For example, critical African intellectuals observe how the influence of ‘Western’ missionaries on certain local churches

created tensions between members of local communities, some of which were perceived as overly submissive to Western cultural imperialism (Meyer, 1994). When missionaries act as purely orthodox agents of faith, they may underestimate the importance of local social and cultural contexts, limiting their success.

An alternative approach is to preach the faith in more exploratory ways that demonstrate respect for local customary beliefs and practices, allowing for constructive dialogue (Hiebert, 2006) and for existing relations of dominance – such as that of ‘Western cultural imperialism’ – to be moderated (Sanneh, 1989). The practice of exploration notably helped some Christian missionaries accommodate and innovate by moving beyond literal Bible translations and adapting key ideas to the reality and power of local cultural systems, including their languages and other sign systems, patterns of behaviour, rituals, myths, beliefs and worldviews (Hiebert, 2006). Explorative Christian missionaries are inclined to value local converts for their particular cultural agency, whereas orthodox missionaries perceive them as cultural clients of elements of a dominant idea system such as those rooted in Western cultural traditions (Sanneh, 1989).

Consistent with the idea of Wray-Bliss (2018), that corporations are governed through the values and beliefs of their leaders, we propose that the business environment also contains orthodox and explorative missionaries holding leadership positions at various levels of the firm and potentially influencing its sustainability performance. We would view exploratory ‘missionary’ characteristics as compatible with the development of an egalitarian rationality (Schwarz & Thompson, 1990) and a transformational/charismatic type of leadership (Reave, 2005). These characteristics arguably create a certain level of trust between the missionary (or leader) and the believers (or followers) (Kaiser, Hogan, & Craig, 2008). This can further be articulated as the creation of a (fraternal) stakeholder-oriented management culture that engages business and social actors in relationships of mutual sympathy and empowerment that facilitates (syncretic) inter-cultural exchange. Here, an interesting connection can be made with the

features typically ascribed to sustainability leaders and champions (e.g., Schaefer, 2004; Visser & Crane, 2010). We see entrepreneurial venture Fairphone as a striking example of the actions of explorative missionaries. The venture began as an activist network of entrepreneurs whose ‘mission’ consisted of promoting the boycott of phones produced by mainstream firms whose production utilises conflict minerals. Fairphone ‘missionaries’ developed an alternative model based on social justice, borrowing the company’s name from the ‘fair trade’ movement and making their mission explicit to customers (e.g., the slogan ‘Start a Movement’ appears on the screen when a Fairphone is switched on). The venture evolved to combine elements of a profit-oriented business model that achieves the dual objective of (1) reaching out to customers (or believers) who may not perceive product quality only in terms of social justice, and (2) improving competitiveness against established companies, instead of boycotting and shaming them. Fairphone is now a fast-growing social enterprise that retains its faith in social justice while embracing traditional business values and practices related to competitiveness and profit-seeking.

Missionary exploration can however be impeded by the tendency of missionaries to over-emphasise the outer layers of culture (i.e. the behaviours, institutions, beliefs and values that are most apparent and immediate), rather than the inner core comprising a worldview, cosmology, ideology and basic belief system (Hesselgrave, 2006). A missionary’s target group can therefore attempt to reassert its ‘culture core’ and seek separation from the idea system promoted by the missionary.

Resistance to the CS message can explain some of the tensions that can arise between the firm and its stakeholders, and between the firm and CS, such as when manager missionaries are viewed internally as too close to external stakeholder interests (Carollo & Guerici, 2017). Wheeler, Fabig, and Boele (2002) report instances of firms failing both to replicate their corporate stakeholder-responsiveness at the local level, and to develop managerial capabilities

at a sufficiently deep level throughout the firm (across business units) to yield benefits for both stakeholders and the business. This can be explained by a lack of explorative potential by business missionaries, and perhaps even by those (scholars and practitioners) who ‘preach’ in favour of a beyond profits approach and stakeholder-oriented culture, but in practice are not able to establish a deeply rooted and far-reaching CS culture within firms. We add that the potential for compatibility or incompatibility between ‘competing’ idea systems in business, and the syncretic dynamics that are at play, do not only depend on missionaries’ intentions and actions. The literature on religious syncretism also emphasises the role of ‘believers’ (e.g., Hiebert, 2006; Meyer, 1994; Sanneh, 1989).

4.2 The role of believers

Believers are mainly concerned about developing their own relations to faith in ways that either preserve aspects of their cultural identities, or translate into obedience under a dominant idea system. Meyer (1994, p. 43) discusses the role of ‘active agents’ of faith, or in Sanneh’s (1989) words ‘local converts’, as a group of critical believers who strive to freely engage with elements from their own idea systems and from others. These believers may attempt to mould an idea system that threatens to dominate, infusing it with elements from their own idea system(s), to integrate it within their cultural identities. This explains the rise of African Christianity, as described by Meyer (1994), in which African intellectuals and ‘believers’ strove to reinterpret the ‘Christian message’ through the prism of their own cultural viewpoints, resulting in a local expression and application of Christianity (Van Rheeën, 2006).

In parallel with the existence of active agents of faith (or critical believers), diverse social and institutional logics governing the world of faith exist to promote obedience to dominant idea systems. One logic can be found in the representation of faith as ‘revealed truth’, that is not framed by culture, and is therefore inflexible and impervious to the infusion of

elements from (foreign) cultural systems (Sanneh, 1989). Another logic stems from positioning missionaries as authoritative agents of faith whose teachings and ideas must be adhered to and reproduced. Believers who accept these logics and embrace the dominant idea system as legitimate truth, may then come to critically evaluate beliefs, decisions and practices drawn from their own cultural contexts (Hiebert, 2006). They can be referred to as conservative believers who are likely to accept the precepts of a dominant idea system as unique truth.

The role of believers in business has received little scholarly attention beyond ideas of using spirituality to ‘improve’ relations between people in the work place and developing a more sustainability-oriented worldview (Cavanagh, 1999). What seems to have been insufficiently scrutinised is the role played by ‘disciples’ of technocentrism in shaping the cultural systems of business organizations. Francis (1993, p. 322) discusses the existence of ‘Cornucopian’ believers amongst technocentrists who continue to support unsustainable levels of growth and resource exploitation because they believe that human will and ingenuity, combined with increasing technological expertise, can overcome future socio-ecological problems. This ‘Old Testament’ version of technocentrism was based around technologies of energy generation, materials science or production/waste processes directly involved in production and consumption systems (reflecting Midgeley’s (1994) ‘Science as Salvation’ doctrine). This is now complemented by a ‘New Testament’ in which more information-based technologies of artificial intelligence, big data, robots and algorithms will solve climate change and other grand challenges in what Morozov (2013) labels ‘Solutionism’.

A more moderate form of technocentrism, promotes resource conservationism and managerialism (Berger et al, 2007). The existence of two distinct forms of technocentrism reflects the idea that the level of commitment to technocentric faith may vary from person to person. The dominance of technocentric faith in the corporate world (Gladwin et al., 1995) means that this variability should not be neglected since it may determine the likelihood of

technocentric believers acting either as critical agents of faith, or as (conservative) clients of faith. We assume that critical technocentric believers are more likely to explore solutions to sustainability problems outside their own idea systems.

Examining the roles played by business missionaries (i.e., orthodox or explorative) and business believers (i.e., critical or conservative) will likely add nuance to the interpretations made about a firm's capacity to shift from technocentrism towards sustaincentrism. In particular, the interactions between diverse agents of faith, with their own socially held expectations and ethical values, may reveal the nature of the transcultural dynamics (Hiebert, 1994) that shape the process of syncretism in business contexts. Novel combinations of elements from divergent idea systems can be produced as individuals attempt to identify common themes and correspondences between alternative paths, assess what elements among idea systems are compatible or incompatible, and in the latter case either select between alternative paths or creatively explore how divergences can be resolved (Shaw & Stewart, 1994; Stewart, 1999). Berk and Galvan corroborate the idea that actors in any institutional contexts are likely to engage in syncretism by drawing "*on a wide variety of cultural and institutional resources to create novel combinations*" (2009, p. 544). Arguably, creativity is more likely to be found within explorative missionaries and critical believers who hold pluralist truth claims and redemptive relations to power. Others, with exclusivist truth claims and hierarchical relations to power, are inclined to perpetuate the status quo.

Table 1 synthesises the elements of the syncretic theory developed in this article. It portrays missionaries and believers as the carriers of varying truth claims (from exclusivist to pluralist) and relations to power (from hierarchical to redemptive) that shape how they are likely to interact with their own idea system, as well as that of others. These characteristics, combined with the existence of diverse idea systems that are brought into contact in corporate environments (Gladwin et al., 1995), provides for a certain level of complexity regarding the

predictability of syncretic outcomes. As Hoffman (1997) explains, the pursuit of sustainability by firms may evolve towards dogma rather than heresy, but corporate responses to socio-environmental issues will remain inconsistent at various levels. The variable intensity (truth claim and relation to power) with which business missionaries and business believers operating in different organizational and industry sectors engage with sustainability is symptomatic of these inconsistencies. The theoretical construct proposed in this article may however be useful in explaining some of the complex faith-related dynamics that are involved in CS, with a potential for informing future inquiries into CS outcomes.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

5. Implications for practice, research and theory

Our analogy between processes of syncretism in religious and cultural environments, and those likely to be encountered in the CS context, focuses on environments in which a battle of competing faiths is under way. Such battles take place in a syncretic field of interaction between (conservative or explorative) business missionaries and (conservative or critical) business believers. While the effects triggered by such interactions remain to be more exhaustively explored in future theoretical and empirical research, the characteristics set out in Table 1 allow us to anticipate four scenarios for interactions:

1. Explorative business missionaries and conservative business believers. In this case, intentions to tackle sustainability issues at leadership levels can succeed or fail on their ability to convince the rest of the organization. A lack of follow through in all business functions and operations (i.e., from a diverse range of ‘believers’: employees, customers, community members, etc) is likely to compromise such initiatives. This case could explain the ‘Green Wall’ of

resistance to deepening CS commitments observed even within companies seen initially as sustainability leaders, once the ‘low-hanging fruit’ of win-win solutions have been harvested (Shelton, 1994). The success of charismatic CS ‘missionaries’ like Paul Polman at Unilever is partly explained by their ability to win-over first middle managers, followed by the rank and file (Kiron et al., 2017).

2. Orthodox business missionaries and critical business believers. Here intentions to tackle sustainability issues from micro levels (e.g., communities, employees, customers) lack support at higher power echelons meaning that these initiatives are likely to become marginalised. As a case in point, in eight years of a joint project between MIT Sloan Management Review and the Boston Consulting Group tracking corporate sustainability initiatives, the actors involved amassed 60,000 survey responses from companies around the world, amongst which only 30% agreed that their sustainability efforts had strong board-level support (Kiron et al., 2017).
3. Orthodox business missionaries and conservative believers. We anticipate here that both sides will engage in sustainability only if it makes business sense (as observed by Engert et al., 2016) and can be overlaid using conventional business logics (e.g., business jargon, norms or symbols or the premium pricing of green products regardless of relative costs). This could include using ‘masking’ strategies – some of which are known in the CS literature as ‘green washing’ (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).
4. Explorative business missionaries and critical believers. A mutual recognition by highly redemptive business agents and stakeholders (cf. Table 1) that technocentrism generates severe social and environmental damages, threats and

uncertainties promotes a new (distinctively more sustaincentric) idea system. Such syncretism can promote dialogues between business agents and members of the wider stakeholder community (Carollo & Guerri, 2017), potentially yielding to a creative mixture of elements from (divergent or convergent) idea systems, such as the one pursued by Fairphone.

Although the language of syncretism can seem esoteric, its use as a management tool can be traced back many centuries, at least to the Roman Empire where gods, festivals, prophets and symbols from conquered territories were assimilated into Roman religion and culture as an aid to the subjugation and integration of their peoples (Webster, 2010). The contemporary management value of this paper follows the logic of Charles Handy's (1993) book *Understanding Organizations* in which he demonstrates that adopting fresh 'interpretive schemes' helps managers to better grasp the underlying dynamics of their company. As Handy notes, to survive when facing challenging conditions, organizations and the managers within them need to act and think very differently. Reframing how they view the world and the organization can help to achieve this.

Understanding progressing a corporate sustainability agenda as a collision of faiths within which syncretic processes and roles are playing out can generate a range of practical questions about issues like leadership, recruitment, organizational change and internal messaging. For example, must the missionary role be played by managers, or can workers with the appropriate beliefs and sense of 'calling' fulfil it? With CS representing an ever more significant career path (Miller & Pogue, 2018), can the human resource departments of large companies identify, recruit and retain individuals as sustainability managers who demonstrate the appropriate explorative missionary characteristics? The literature has explored the role of spirituality in career decision making (Lips-Wiersma, 2002), and whether the expertise of sustainability leaders impacts sustainability performance (Peters, Romi, & Sanchez, 2019), but

what are the implications of varied levels of individual beliefs in business and sustainability on peoples' ability to effectively promote the CS agenda?

Our syncretic reframing sketches out faith-based roles (missionaries or believers), influences (truth claim and relation to power) and scenarios for interaction, that provide an alternative way for managers to diagnose and understand the situation and actors within companies. For example, with increasing discussion about the practical impact of CEO activism (Chatterji & Toffel, 2018) and employee activism (Skoglund & Böhm, 2019) in progressing CS, their emergence and potential for interaction seem ripe for reconsidering from a syncretic perspective. Such reframing can open up consideration of a range of alternative theoretical perspectives and practical management options to help progress how we understand and approach the adoption of sustainability strategies, beyond conventional top-down strategic directions and appeals to business logic. The syncretic model notably provides an explanation for why some well-argued pro-sustainability strategies might fail to convince people. Although it is counter-intuitive from a managerial tradition rooted in rationality, a believer faced with convincing factual evidence that challenges their beliefs may simply treat the evidence as a “test” of their faith rather than as a reason to change their minds and behaviour. Additionally, a faith-based, syncretic perspective may reveal tensions and risks involved in promoting sustainability. Paul Polman's ‘missionary zeal’ may have been effective in winning converts within Unilever (Kiron et al., 2017), but other stakeholders responded less favourably. An analyst expressing the financial community's frustration with Polman commented:

“Polman is messianic: its well known that he thought about being a priest in his younger days. He was very preachy” (Uttley, 2019, p. 7).

From a managerial and policy perspective, the recognition of syncretic roles, and their faith-related characteristics, adds a new dimension previously unexplored in current strategies for responding more effectively to sustainability concerns. We suggest that this dimension is

considered in future research separately from, and/or as a complement to, other psychological traits that are used to understand the human factors that determine business progress towards sustainability. However, it must be recognised that the conceptual propositions made in this paper have limitations; in particular, they do not have the same relevance across all organizational and institutional situations and contexts.

Firstly, the level of intensity of syncretic dynamics is likely to undergo variability across contexts (Clack, 2011). Not all organizational, institutional and cultural contexts are constituted in terms of missionaries and believers who actively seek to impose or preserve their faith (Hood Jr, Hill, & Spilka, 2018). In religion, for instance, Hinduism is often portrayed as an ‘accepting’ or non-proselytising faith, the adherents of which are likely to refrain from political intervention, social activism and entrepreneurialism (Audretsch, Boente, & Tamvada, 2013). In the CS context, such a (passive) approach to faith might hinder innovation for sustainability when it translates into excessive conservatism, rigidity, taciturnity, procrastination and inertia. (Essoo & Dibb, 2004). In discussing the effects of routine rigidity in organizational contexts, Dooley (2018) emphasises the extent to which it can inhibit change towards, and innovation for, sustainability. The inaction and lack of moral commitment to address sustainability issues from adherents of the status quo in free market capitalism is deplored by some scholars who seek to understand how ‘sustainability leadership’ is stimulated (e.g., Martinez, 2019). That might be taken to demonstrate that the ‘ideal types’ of active missionaries and critical believers discussed in this paper are sought after in the CS literature. The analysis of the syncretic phenomena at play in CS contexts might contribute to unveil the (so far underexplored) faith-related characteristics of successful leadership for sustainability. Leaders who realise the potential of faith as a driver to their company’s sustainability performance, one that engages stakeholders (employees, customers, suppliers, NGOs) as pro-sustainability missionaries

and/or believers, may choose to emphasise these practices more consciously as part of their leadership style, thereby creating a more meaningful work environment (Visser & Crane, 2010).

Secondly, in an analysis of how syncretism applies to CS contexts, it is important to recognise that the existence of varying levels of ‘faith literacy’ across cultures discussed by Davie and Dinham (2018) and Marcus (2018) might impede syncretic engagement. The capacity of individuals to understand subjective religious scripts, as well as complex sustainability principles (Wamsler et al., 2018), is likely to determine whether they are at ease with the cognitive demands of syncretism. For example, Dooley (2018) explains that some business agents might follow certain rituals or routines while overlooking or ignoring their deeper meanings. Some might (re)connect with the deeper meanings of rituals when a crisis emerges that triggers willingness to debate, enhanced mindfulness and positive emotional stimuli (Wamsler et al., 2018). In this case, syncretic phenomena, and the ‘battle’ of competing faiths that it seeks to explain, might begin to take more evident shapes.

Finally, critics of the syncretic approach advocated here may stress that management practice and scholarship is an essentially secular field, limiting the value of an understanding of faithing and religious processes. For them, perspectives based on paradoxes (as reviewed by Hahn et al., 2018) or ideologies (as reviewed by Haase & Raufflet, 2017) may seem sufficient to understand the cultural processes involved in firms developing their CSR towards CS (Maon, Lindgreen, & Swaen, 2010). However, as Frederick (1998, p. 52) explores, the religious impulse that seeks for meaning in life is inherent in all humans. It manifests itself in corporate life, even if for some the sought meaning is to be found in “*the daily worship of corporate power and glory*” amongst “*managers who disregard the planetary damage of their reckless ecological decisions, or who uncaringly cut off at midcareer the productive lives of down-sized employees*”. He concludes that “*it is time to rip the mask of religious furtiveness off the corporate face. Personal religious philosophies of all kinds abound in the workplace.*” One

only has to examine the ongoing public debate about man-made climate change, and the persistence of climate change denial in the face of over-whelming scientific evidence and consensus, to realise the extent to which key sustainability debates play out in a world of faiths rather than facts.

Understanding and exploring discussions about sustainability and the future of management theory and practice using syncretism (and a perspective based around faith and faithing processes) has the potential to open up a range of new avenues of exploration. Are corporate stakeholders beginning to relate to CS as a form of salvation rather than a route to compliance or competitive advantage? Does adoption of CS strategies confer a sense of comfort for the mass of believers in the face of uncertainty, whilst reinforcing a sense of control amongst powerful leaders and missionaries, in line with some of religion's perceived social roles? Do potentially tokenistic strategies from carbon offsets to plastic bag levies play the role of 'indulgences' that allow the continuation of unsustainable practices to be 'forgiven'? Do certain business agents hold 'fundamentalist' beliefs that make compromise or progress towards CS difficult? These are the types of interesting questions that exploring the battle of faiths between technocentrism and sustainability can generate.

The application of a syncretic perspective to the challenge of developing more pro-sustainability organizational environments also has implications for future theorizing and research, particular in relation to the management of paradoxes and institutional logics. Our perspective supports and expands growing theoretical and empirical literature exploring the role of agency in organizational logic multiplicity; in particular research in social welfare and multiple agency (e.g., Mitchell, Weaver, Agle, Bailey, & Carlson, 2016), origins of hybridization (e.g., Busco, Giovannoni, & Riccaboni, 2017) and embedded agency in paradoxes and institutional complexity (e.g., Schildt & Perkmann, 2017). These streams of literature bring actors and their values to the fore and challenge the dominant single-objective logic of

management theory with its emphasis on identification of trade-offs and criteria for prioritizing logics. A shared finding of these papers and our framework is that most, if not all, organizations routinely and durably accommodate multiple logics (Schildt & Perkmann, 2017) and to some extent, all managers have a dual identity balancing private and public interest (Vermeulen & Witjes, 2016), as well as missionaries' and believers' characteristics.

A recurrent theme that resonates with our propositions is that organizational actors are strongly reluctant to engage in trade-offs between logics (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2016; Schildt & Perkmann, 2017). Instead, they creatively deploy multi-objective reasoning that focuses on the design of 'truces' accommodating seemingly irreconcilable logics (Mitchell et al., 2016). Current research has only started to investigate the processes of negotiation between actors and mediation of logics leading to such truces (Bishop & Waring, 2016). Such negotiations aim to preserve the distinction between logics while also exploiting the benefits of their interdependence (Busco et al., 2017). Truces can combine, mediate or bridge elements of different logics or preserve distinct logics (Busco et al., 2017; Delbridge & Edwards, 2013). However, extant literature observes that more research is needed to understand why and when one or another type of truce is negotiated (Schildt & Perkmann, 2017) and to what extent the type of truce is decided by actors or dictated by situational variables and structural factors (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013). Our framework adds granularity to the analysis of the role of actors in multi-stakeholders' agency, explaining how differences between explorative and conservative missionaries and between critical and conservative believers are likely to result in different types of settlements between logics.

The syncretic perspective complements research applying paradox perspectives to understand how managers seek to reconcile conflicting pressures associated with the pursuit of sustainability in relation to their own individual roles, social structures and psycho-social traits. For example, Carollo and Guerri (2017) find that managers accept and maintain sustainability-

related tensions and paradoxes but the faithing processes underlying these phenomena have remained obscure. We add that current research in hybrids and institutional logics has not yet fully explained in what conditions multiple logics and paradoxes persist without resulting in an organization that has a continuous sense of competing goals or conflicting identities (Schildt & Perkmann, 2017), particularly when seeking to address sustainability challenges (Jay, 2013). It constitutes yet another stream of studies that have largely ignored the syncretic ‘faithing’ processes that are at play in business environments, despite their potential to substantiate explanations of the blending processes discussed by several authors in this field, including (York, Hargrave, & Pacheco, 2016). For example, York et al. (2016) focus on how actors respond to logic incompatibility (economising versus ecologising) by discussing three mechanisms: elaboration, assimilation and hybridisation. They observed that attempts by less powerful actors to gain voice did not resolve incompatibility, but rather motivated eventual contestation. We introduce the critical role of actors as missionaries and believers in shaping the way in which incompatible logics are dealt with. Our propositions suggest that actors can not only tolerate divergences between idea systems but also actively negotiate adoption of syncretic forms that preserve logic multiplicity. Therefore, our framework highlights the distinctive role of missionaries and believers, leading us to contribute insights on agentic processes of conciliation and mediation between multiple logics – and complementing thereby the works of, e.g., York et al. (2016), and Carollo and Guerri (2017).

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we articulated the core elements of a theory of syncretism for CS including its underlying construct antecedents (syncretic roles: missionaries and believers), assumptions (see Table 1), limitations, and theoretical implications. Using analogical reasoning as a method of analysis, we define syncretism as the combination of elements from two or more idea systems

in the CS context. We emphasise the roles of business missionaries and business believers, both carrying within themselves varying levels of (1) sensibility to sustainability issues and (2) capacity to open themselves to ‘external’ idea systems and viewpoints. The type of relationships that are developed amongst and between them is alleged to critically shape a firm’s sustainability performance.

Syncretic engagement from business missionaries and believers who are exposed to a diversity of idea systems will hopefully help research to raise some of the difficult issues of organizational transformation for sustainable development in business communities. Wright and Nyberg vehemently warn that our society will meet self-destruction if business continues its current practice of converting grand environmental challenges into “*the more familiar and less threatening discourses of profit maximization and shareholder value*” (2017, p. 1657). In this effect, the syncretic framework developed in this article will contribute as a useful conceptual resource for advancing the sustainability agenda by legitimising, and perhaps reinforcing, the determination of “*extraordinary individual innovators and entrepreneurs*” (Elkington, Hartigan, & Litovsky, 2010, p. 83) – defined in this article as exploratory missionaries and critical believers – to develop and adhere to ideas of sustainable entrepreneurship and intrapreneurship.

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Table 1. Syncretic roles, truth claims, relation to power and management implications

<div>Explanatory Variables</div> <div>Roles</div>	TRUTH CLAIM		RELATION TO POWER	
	Exclusivist	Pluralist	Hierarchical	Redemptive
MISSIONARY ‘Representative of dominant idea system(s)’	<u>Religion / culture</u> Preservation and diffusion of elements of a dominant idea system	<u>Religion / culture</u> Exploration based on an effort to contextualise faith and become familiar with a diversity of cultural constructs.	<u>Religion / culture</u> Inflexible conformity and exclusive superiority of one culture against another; and perpetual control, occupation, relocation and reorganization of social context.	<u>Religion / culture</u> Capacity to deviate from path dependencies and participate in intercultural and interpersonal exchange, as the recognition that whatever and however we are doing now, we can do differently and, under certain circumstances, we must do differently in order to live ethically as neighbours.
	<u>Management</u> Conservative devotion to the idea that the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits.	<u>Management</u> Explorative quest for a stakeholder-oriented business culture.	<u>Management</u> Preserve integrity of technocentric faith, preach for the alignment of sustainability response with what makes business sense.	<u>Management</u> Challenge technocentric faith; preach for the adaptation of sustainability response to local contingencies.
BELIEVER ‘Representative of target idea system(s)’	<u>Religion / culture</u> Believer as conservative agents of faith (or client of the dominant faith): Truth is found within a dominant idea system, leading to a critical evaluation of elements of target idea systems (i.e., enduring customs, beliefs and practices pertaining to a specific social and cultural context).	<u>Religion / culture</u> Believer as critical agent of faith: Exploration based on the adaptation of a ‘dominant’ idea system that may be infused with elements of target idea system(s), so that faith becomes integrated with the cultural identities of believers	<u>Religion / culture</u> Need to relate to an external source of power for personal and spiritual advancement. No authentic niche beyond the reach of hegemonic power.	<u>Religion / culture</u> Capacity to resist hegemonic power and enact one’s own cultural agency.
	<u>Management</u> Obedience to technocentrism as the only legitimate way of running a business	<u>Management</u> Recognition that traditional ways of doing business are unsustainable; it follows that the economic paradigm that dominates the corporate world must be changed, and infused with pro-sustainability ideas.	<u>Management</u> Preserve integrity of technocentric faith; sustain dependence on dominant institutional logics that guide business activities.	<u>Management</u> Challenge technocentric faith; seek no compromise with moral values such as those held by CSR and sustainability believers.