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# Environmental Activism and Moral Schemas: Cultural Components of Differential Participation

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## Abstract

Why do some people, but not others, participate in environmental activism? This article considers a potentially powerful yet underresearched explanation: variation in moral schemas. Drawing on Durkheim's theory about the role of sacredness in moral decision making, the article classifies respondents into three mutually exclusive groups: *unencharnted*, who do not believe nature is sacred; *intrinsic*, who believe that nature is sacred in itself; and *creational*, who believe nature is sacred because it is a divine creation. Group membership predicts environmental activism using the 2000 General Social Survey. Individuals holding an intrinsic schema are more likely than other groups to sign an environmental petition and participate in an environmental group. Individuals holding an intrinsic or creational schema are more likely to donate money to environmental causes, relative to the unenchanted. Findings are robust, controlling for religious tradition, education, and various predictors of biographical availability. Both sacredness and its source matter for proenvironmental behavior.

## Keywords

environmental behavior, morality, culture, cognition, religion

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Scholarly attention about the role of moral beliefs in social life has increased in recent years (Berenguer, 2010; Hitlin & Vaisey, 2010; Smith, 2003; Vaisey, 2009). Indeed, few concepts are as important to explaining social life as are moral ideas—namely, social constructions of right versus wrong and good versus bad, what is desirable, and what justice, equality, and the “good life” look like. We rely on social constructions of moral phenomenon to explain how people believe and act, ranging from everyday concerns about how to treat friends, family, and coworkers, to public and political beliefs about civil rights, abortion, war, unemployment, poverty, corporate ethics, and educational inequality, to even larger moral frameworks rooted in nationality, gender, or religion.

How individuals and social groups relate to the environment is also deeply tied to moral beliefs about what is good and right vis-à-vis the environment. Yet, as I argue below, our current understandings about how moral beliefs influence environmental behavior are undertheorized and deserve increased attention. In this article, I develop and test a theoretical model to explain how variation in environmental behavior can be linked to variation in moral schemas. Following Durkheim’s (2001) foundational theory about the sacred and the profane, I define moral schemas as *orientations toward moral evaluation, informed by what individuals believe to be sacred*. The case of environmental behavior is especially suitable for an analysis of moral schemas given that the natural environment is commonly understood as something set apart or perhaps sacred. I focus on a particular sort of environmental behavior: civic and political action. In doing this, I attempt to bring together relevant work spanning social movements, cultural sociology, and environmental sociology.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Differential Participation in Environmental Activism*

To date, the majority of scholarship on differential participation in environmental activism draws on predominant theories in social movement research about the role of preexisting networks for shaping who participates and who does not (McAdam, 1986; Nepstad & Smith, 2001; Viterna, 2006). Other scholars, focusing less on networks, turned to the ways in which sociodemographic position shapes attitudes, behavior, and, in some instances, activism (Van Liere & Dunlap, 1980). This strand of literature resembled simultaneous work in social movements on the effect of biographical availability on differential participation in activism. Both focus on the role sociodemographics

play in promoting or inhibiting activism. Within the social movement literature, McAdam (1986) refers to biographical availability as “the absence of personal constraints that may increase the costs and risks of movement participation, such as full-time employment, marriage, and family responsibilities” (p. 70). These sociodemographic factors, it was thought, might hinder one’s ability to participate in social movement activism. But, counter to common knowledge, some scholars found that biographical *unavailability*, in general, does *not* inhibit participation in social movements (e.g., Barkan, Cohn, & Whitaker, 1995; but see Beyerlein & Hipp, 2006).

Although work in sociology on the environment has pursued similar sociodemographic and biographical predictors, they have most often done so by looking at their effect on attitudes and nonpolitical behavior. For example, a wide body of literature has identified (although somewhat tenuously) younger age, better educated, and politically liberal as the most reliable predictors of proenvironmental attitudes over time and across studies (Jones & Dunlap, 1992). Outside of this, scholars have struggled to identify other dependable factors related to sociodemographic position, especially as they relate to activism. Scholars have explored less consistent and more complex predictors, such as gender (Blocker & Eckberg, 1997; Stern, Dietz, & Kalof, 1993), racial and class-based inequalities (Bullard, 2000; Downey, 2003), and the varied impacts of religious tradition and individual religious beliefs (Sherkat & Ellison, 2007; White, 1967), among other factors. These findings show just how complex the issues related to environmental concern and behavior are. More work is needed, however, with regard to understanding who participates in environmental *activism* in particular, rather than just environmental attitudes or nonpolitical environmental behavior. To untangle some of this complexity, scholars have begun to pursue theories of differential participation rooted in morality and culture.

### *Moral and Cultural Aspects of Activism*

More recently, scholars have turned to cultural foundations of collective action, opening new avenues of research for understanding environmental activism (Jasper, 1999; Jasper & Poulsen, 1995; Mika, 2006; Sherkat & Ellison, 2007; Smith, 1996). One of the most interesting examples of the cultural turn in social movements, in my estimation, is work on moral schemas and protest. In Jasper and Poulsen’s (1995) influential article, they argue for the salience of “moral shocks” in the mobilization process, showing how participants were recruited to the animal rights movement using condensed moral symbols, such as graphic images of tortured and abused animals. Other groups

draw on such symbols as well. For example, prolife groups have recruited using images of aborted fetuses, and environmental groups shock people into action using photos of oil-soaked wildlife in the wake of an oil spill. Jasper and Poulsen suggest that “moral shocks, condensing symbols, and other cultural devices need to be studied in more detail as key ingredients in movement recruitment” (Jasper & Poulsen, 1995, p. 509). This work is important because it shows that using symbols and images that draw on people’s deeply held moral beliefs are effective devices for getting people engaged in movement activism.

Other scholars have pursued these issues by linking social movement participation with work in sociology of religion. For example, Sherkat and Ellison (1997) examine how cultural and religious beliefs provided the cognitive moral structures needed for conservative Protestants to mobilize against pornography. In another study, they apply a similar approach, and examine how religious tradition, as well as religious beliefs, affect environmental attitudes and behavior (Sherkat & Ellison, 2007). These studies make clear that the moral beliefs provided by religion matter, independently of other explanations. This project builds on these studies but attempts to explore broader and more universally held moral schemas that are not necessarily tied to any one religious tradition or institution.

### *Theorizing Moral Schemas, Sacredness, and the Environment*

Given his enduring influence over the field of sociology, especially as it pertains to moral aspects of society, I identify commonly held moral schemas by applying Durkheim’s classical sociological distinction between the sacred and profane. With regard to my specific case of environmental activism, I root moral schemas in beliefs about the sacredness (or profaneness) of the natural environment.

How are beliefs about sacredness related to moral schemas? That is, what does being sacred have to do with being moral? For Durkheim, the sacred is that which is set apart, guarded by moral boundaries with dangerous prohibitions. The sacred needs protecting. Powerful moral force is ascribed to that which is deemed sacred—thus explaining “the extreme strictness of the prohibitions that separate the sacred from the profane” (Durkheim, 1912, p. 237). The different socially constructed moral intuitions internalized by societies and subcultures are inseparable from that which they set apart and guard with prohibitions (e.g., human rights, freedom, equality, capitalism),

and that which they view as everyday or profane. Such beliefs, argues Durkheim, play a central role in how we operate in the world—or to put it more precisely, *beliefs about what is sacred are inseparable from moral schemas*. They specify what and why we choose to protect one thing (but not another), and provide motivation to do so.

In terms of differential participation in environmental activism, I expect that moral beliefs about the sacredness of the environment will have an impact on who participates and who does not. Of course, there are other important exogenous factors that research has shown to have a major effect on who participates, but this article argues that cultural and moral dimensions deserve more attention and should be included in our theories and models. Such core beliefs structure how environmental problems are interpreted and framed and, more importantly, how they are acted upon. Individuals do not approach various environmental issues ad hoc but rather rely on such internalized moral schema that inform them about what is morally good and right vis-à-vis the natural environment and humanity's relationship to it.

### *Sacred Moral Beliefs and Environmental Activism*

More recently, research has just begun to investigate this link between sacred beliefs and environmental activism. First, taking an anthropological and cognitive scientific approach, Kempton, Boster, and Hartley's (1995) seminal book *Environmental Values in American Culture* argues that the cultural models leading to environmental action are "based on fundamental moral and religious views on the relationship between nature and humanity" (Kempton et al., 1995, p. 2-3). Referencing their qualitative interviews, they note how overtly *nonreligious* respondents regularly refer to nature's sacredness as a moral reason for why they act to protect the environment. Unfortunately, this finding in Kempton et al. (1995) is an anecdote and is not explored in depth or subject to deeper empirical analysis. Mika (2006) uses a similar argument to explain why so many vegetarians and animal activists are atheist or agnostic, claiming that "for many, commitment to the principles of vegetarianism and animal rights is part of an individual, even communal, spiritual ethic" (p. 918). In other words, activism provides them with a medium to put into action their moral beliefs about the sacredness of animals, in the absence of any formal religious belief structure (Maurer, 2002). Like Kempton et al. (2005), Mika merely suggests that sacred beliefs may play a role, but the structure of such beliefs, who believes them, and how they come to bear on activism is still unclear.

More recently, Ignatow's (2006) article on cultural models of nature and society sheds important light on the potential role of sacred beliefs in environmental concern. Ignatow proposes two schemas through which to understand environmental concern. His "ecology" schema describes a more scientific approach to environmental problems, whereas his "spiritual" schema is rooted in moral language about human harm and environmental harmony—the notion "that the natural world is sacred and in harmony when left alone" (Ignatow, 2006). His findings suggest that beliefs about the sacredness of nature constitute a certain moral schema, and that these moral schemas are an important source for general environmental concern. He does not, however, examine how such moral schemas might influence actual participation in environmental activism.

In an influential article exploring environmental concern, Dietz, Stern, and Guagnano (1998) include a short excursus in their conclusion about the role of sacredness in shaping environmental concern and behavior. In their brief statistical analysis (no coefficients or models are provided in the article), they find that sacred moral beliefs are significantly associated with willingness to sacrifice and environmentally friendly consumer behavior. They do not provide results for their other three dependent variables: signing a petition, being a member of an environmental group, and environmental spending. In this short analysis, they conclude that the most interesting thing about sacred moral beliefs is that the reasons for which people believe something to be sacred—(a) God and (b) Nature itself—make a statistically significant difference. Individuals who believed that nature is sacred because it is created by God were significantly more likely to be willing to sacrifice for the environment. Yet, for predicting actual behavior, Dietz and colleagues find that those who believed that nature is sacred in itself were significantly more likely to exhibit more environmentally friendly consumer behavior than those who did not ascribe sacredness to nature. They conclude their "preliminary analysis" with a call for more work on these moral beliefs, with confidence that such work has the potential to uncover "meaningful links" between sacredness and environmentalism "that are not tied to denomination or religiosity and that have not yet been properly specified theoretically" (Dietz et al., 1998, p. 465).

In this study, I take up Dietz et al.'s (1998) call to explore these important, yet overlooked, concepts that have yet to be rigorously analyzed empirically. I do this by not only specifying theoretically but also testing empirically how such moral beliefs about the sacredness of nature affect activism. Drawing from this above work, I next turn to examine my three specific moral schemas.

### Three Moral Schemas

Given the argument above about the importance of sacred moral schemas, my first move is to create two categories of analysis: those who believe nature is sacred and those who do not. Furthermore, I also expect that the reasons, or source, of sacredness may matter, and therefore follow Dietz et al. (1998) in distinguishing between those who believe that nature is sacred because it is a divine creation and those who believe that nature is sacred in itself. The result is three schema categories: creational (*sacred* because it is a divine creation), intrinsic (*sacred* in itself), and unenchanted (*not* sacred). I briefly explain the rationale behind each schema and propose two general hypotheses about their effect on participation in activism.

The *creational schema* operates with the belief that nature is the creation of a supreme or divine being, and as a result, is believed to be sacred. Those who hold this belief will, if Durkheim is right, necessarily set up moral boundaries and motivations to protect sacred creation. This schema taps a traditional theological concept spanning most religious traditions.

The *intrinsic schema* operates with the moral belief that nature is sacred in itself, and therefore should be protected. Belief in God is not a necessary condition for ascribing sacredness to objects. This category captures the frequent respondents in Kempton et al. (1995) who reference sacredness but make it very clear that they are nonreligious. The crucial point here is that the source of sacredness has changed (to nature *itself*), but the moral boundaries and prescriptions that follow from this belief are still present because sacredness is still present. Thus, this moral schema indicates a higher valuation of nature and perhaps a higher propensity to act on its behalf.

The *unenchanted schema* functions with the belief that nature is *not* sacred. Following Durkheim, I theorize that moral boundaries and moral prohibitions do not *necessarily* flow from this schema. Individuals operating with this schema may have other reasons for wanting to protect nature, but these reasons do not stem from sacred moral beliefs. If nature is part of the “everyday” and not set apart or sacred, then I expect these individuals to have less of a moral obligation to protect it.

Given the past research and the theory developed above using Durkheim to link sacred beliefs to moral schemas, I hypothesize the following:

*Hypothesis 1:* Net of other factors, moral schemas about nature being sacred (creational, intrinsic) will associate with higher probabilities of participation in environmental activism.

Based on the limited findings in Dietz et al. (1998) about the source of sacredness mattering, as well as the qualitative interviews in Kempton et al. (1995), I also predict the following:

*Hypothesis 2:* Net of other factors, within the two sacred moral schemas, the intrinsic moral schema will yield a higher probability of participation than the creational moral schema.

## Data, Measures, and Method

### Data

The data come from the 2000 General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is a survey of the noninstitutionalized adult population of the United States, conducted regularly since 1972 by the National Opinion Research Center. The 2000 GSS ( $N = 2,817$ ) is the most recent version of the GSS to include a module measuring a range of environmental beliefs and behaviors, making it particularly suitable for this study.

### Environmental Activism

I use three measures of environmental civic and political action. The first is a dichotomous measure, where respondents were asked, "In the last 5 years, have you signed a petition about an environmental issue?" The second dependent variable is another dichotomous measure, asking respondents, "In the last 5 years, have you given money to an environmental group?" The third dependent variable asks respondents whether they are "a member of any group whose main aim is to preserve or protect the environment?" All three of these variables were coded 1 if respondents indicated "Yes" and 0 if they selected "No."

### Moral Schemas

To measure each moral schema, I constructed dichotomous variables from a multinomial question, asking respondents to select which statement about nature is closest to their view. I coded the *creational schema* using the response "Nature is sacred because it is created by God." The *intrinsic schema* was generated from the response "Nature is spiritual or sacred in itself." Lastly, the *unenchanting schema* are those respondents who believe that "Nature is important but not spiritual or sacred." Respondents were unable



to select more than one response. This question was part of the subtopic module on the environment ( $N = 1,075$ ) and is meant to be representative of the U.S. population (noninstitutionalized, and age 18 and older).

### Other Controls

Because prior studies on environmental activism have identified that other factors affect these outcomes, I control for the following variables that might have otherwise confounded the effects of the moral schemas: gender (1 = *female*, 0 = *male*); age (ages 18 to 89+); race (Black, Other race, White); income (household income, 12 categories); education (highest year of school completed, 19 categories); political ideology (7-point ordinal, 1 = *extremely liberal* to 7 = *extremely conservative*); and religious service attendance (9-point scale, 1 = *never attend* to 9 = *more than once a week*). I also control for the potential confounding effect of adherence to different religious traditions. I follow Steensland et al.'s (2000) definitive classification scheme, creating six mutually exclusive dichotomous variables: mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, Black Protestant, Catholic, other faith, and the religiously unaffiliated. Finally, I include three measures of biographical availability: marital status (1 = *married*, 0 = *not married*), children (8-point scale, 0 = *no children* to 8 = *eight or more children*), and full-time work status (1 = *working full-time*, 0 = *not working full-time*).

Table 1 reports the descriptive data for all variables used in the analysis, painting a general picture of the data used in predictive analyses below. Looking at the means for environmental activism, we see that almost 3 times as many respondents have signed a petition (22%) or given money for an environmental cause (23%) than have participated in an environmental organization (9%). Turning to the three moral schemas, we see that there is a fairly even distribution between the three groups, with slightly more respondents ascribing to the creational schema (44%, as compared with 26% and 30%, respectively).

### Analytic Strategy

Because all three dependent variables are dichotomous, I use logistic regression to estimate all models. This strategy is useful because it allows me to explore the probability of each dependent variable occurring. In the regression tables that follow, I display the unstandardized regression coefficients (log of the odds), but when exploring the substantive findings in the text, I convert these coefficients to odd ratios ( $e^{\text{logits}}$ ). In all models, listwise deletion

**Table 1.** Descriptive Data on All Variables Used in the Analysis.

Variable	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Environmental activism			
Signed an environmental petition	0-1	0.222	0.416
Gave money for environment	0-1	0.228	0.420
Participant in environmental group	0-1	0.087	0.281
Moral schemas			
Creational	0-1	0.440	0.497
Intrinsic	0-1	0.258	0.438
Unenchanted	0-1	0.303	0.460
Demographics			
Female	0-1	0.564	0.496
Age	18-89	46.022	17.366
Black	0-1	0.152	0.360
Other race	0-1	0.062	0.241
White	0-1	0.786	0.410
Income	1-12	10.900	2.350
Education	1-19	13.200	2.870
Political ideology	1-7	3.900	1.410
Region (Pacific)	0-1	0.139	0.346
Religious attendance	1-9	3.530	2.750
Religious tradition			
Evangelical Protestant	0-1	0.248	0.432
Mainline Protestant	0-1	0.180	0.384
Black Protestant	0-1	0.100	0.300
Catholic	0-1	0.260	0.439
Other faith	0-1	0.059	0.235
Nonaffiliated	0-1	0.152	0.360
Biographical availability			
Married	0-1	0.454	0.498
Children	0-8	1.799	1.660
Full-time work status	0-1	0.541	0.498

is used to handle missing data. I conducted collinearity diagnostics on all of the models but found very little collinearity among the independent variables (according to the thresholds specified in Allison, 1999). Because I am interested in measuring whether or not a general belief that nature is sacred (e.g., creational and intrinsic) makes a difference, I use the unenchanted schema as my reference category. This also allows me to conduct a comparison of the

effects of the creational schema versus intrinsic schema (using postestimation commands, such as the Wald test) to understand how the *source or reason* of sacredness might also matter for activism.

To test my theory and examine its usefulness, I begin by exploring empirically the different social bases of each moral schema, arguing that these distinct moral-nature schemas are associated with different social groups. I then empirically estimate the effect of each moral schema on three measures of environmental activism. I analyze these findings, appraising their empirical and theoretical contribution to the ongoing puzzle of why some, but not others, participate in environmental activism.

## Results

### *Social Bases of Moral Schemas*

My first task is to sketch the social location of each moral schema by analyzing their relative frequencies with other social variables. Table 2 reports descriptive frequencies, providing a basic social picture of these three moral schemas. In the creational schema, we see that females (49%), Blacks (62%), the less educated (52% and 47%), politically conservative (49%), politically moderate (47%), and the religiously affiliated have relatively high frequencies. In the intrinsic column, we see that higher education levels (34% and 36%), other faith (41%), politically liberal (38%), and the religiously nonaffiliated (41%) have the highest frequencies relative to other social categories in this schema. In the unenchanted column, we see that males (38%), those born after 1959 (34%), graduate school (39%), the religiously unaffiliated (41%), and political conservatives (34%) fall in this category at higher rates, relative to other categories.

### *Environmental Activism*

Next, I observe the bivariate relationship between moral schemas and three measures of environmental activism. The top of Table 2 shows that those who believe that nature is sacred in itself report higher rates of signing an environmental petition (40%), compared with the creational (30%) and unenchanted (30%) moral schemas. Comparing those who have given money for an environmental cause, I find similar results, showing that the intrinsic (38%) give at higher rates than respondents espousing a creational (32%) or unenchanted (32%) moral schema. Turning to the last measure of activism, I again find similar results. Those who believe that nature is

**Table 2.** Relative Frequencies of Moral Schemas ( $N = 869$ ).

	Creational schema	Intrinsic schema	Unenchanted schema
Environmental activism			
Signed an environmental petition	30	40	30
Gave money for environment	32	38	30
Participant in environmental group	32	38	30
Demographics			
Female	49	26	25
Male	37	25	38
Born after 1959	47	19	34
Born 1946-1959	45	25	30
Born before 1946	41	31	28
Black	62	16	22
Other race	44	30	26
White	41	27	32
Region (Pacific)	34	31	35
Education			
Less than high school	52	21	27
High school	47	22	31
Bachelor's degree	36	34	30
Graduate school	25	36	39
Political affiliation			
Politically liberal	34	38	28
Politically moderate	47	24	29
Politically conservative	49	17	34
Religious tradition			
Evangelical Protestant	55	16	29
Mainline Protestant	43	27	30
Black Protestant	66	16	18
Catholic	43	24	33
Other faith	38	41	21
Nonaffiliated	18	41	41
Biographical availability			
Married	43	23	34
No children	36	37	27
1-4 children	46	22	32
5-8 children	62	12	26
Full-time working status	42	27	31

Note: Distributions on the liberal and conservative political variables represent means of three categories: extremely liberal/conservative, liberal/conservative, and slightly liberal/conservative. As noted in the "Data, Measures, and Method" section, the regression models use a continuous measure of political affiliation, age, and children rather than these categorical variables. To show the frequencies above, I have split these continuous variables into meaningful categorical variables.

intrinsically sacred still record higher levels of membership in environmental groups (38%), more so than those adhering to a creational schema (32%) or unenchanted schema (30%). These findings are generally supportive of my hypotheses above—but, do they change after controlling for potentially confounding factors such as education, political ideology, demographics, and biographical availability?

In what follows, I present three separate tables that display logistic regression coefficients predicting each of the environmental behaviors. Beginning with Table 3, I find that the intrinsic schema, net of important factors, has a significant and positive effect on the probability of signing a petition. This coefficient weakens slightly across the four models as more controls are added, but nonetheless remains significant in the full model (Model 4). The coefficient drops most precipitously from Model 2 to Model 3 when the demographic variables are introduced—with education and politics having the largest effect. However, even with these variables included, Model 4 demonstrates that individuals with an intrinsic schema are 1.58 times,  $\exp(0.46) = 1.58$ , more likely to sign a petition than are individuals who believe that nature is not sacred. The creational schema does not yield any significant effects in any of the models, despite it predicting negative effects on signing a petition.

Table 4 displays results about who is more likely to give money for the environment. The results are very similar to who signed a petition. Net of controls, and compared with the unenchanted, the intrinsic schema has a significant and positive effect on the probability of giving money for the environment. This coefficient is stable across all of the models. Introducing variables related to biographical availability has no effect on the influence of moral schemas on giving money. Looking at Model 4 then, individuals who believe that nature is sacred in itself are 1.75 times more likely to give their money for environmental causes (Model 4), compared with individuals adhering to an unenchanted schema. Once again, I find no significant differences between the creational and unenchanted schemas.

Table 5 presents coefficients predicting participation in an environmental group. These results paint a somewhat different, and more complex, picture than the results from signing a petition or giving money. The creational schema, net of the control variables, has a significant positive effect on participating in an environmental group. In more substantive terms, individuals who believe that nature is sacred because it was created by God are nearly 3 times,  $\exp(1.08) = 2.945$ , more likely to participate in an environmental group (Model 4), compared with individuals who do not believe nature is sacred. These effects get stronger as more variables are added, suggesting a suppression

**Table 3.** Unstandardized Coefficients From Logistic Regressions Predicting Signing an Environmental Petition.

Independent variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<b>Moral schemas</b>				
Creational	-0.37 (0.203)	-0.24 (0.209)	-0.20 (0.221)	-0.18 (0.222)
Intrinsic	0.63** (0.203)	0.56** (0.207)	0.45* (0.216)	0.46* (0.217)
Unenchanted	—	—	—	—
<b>Control variables</b>				
Evangelical Protestant		-1.14*** (0.284)	-0.97** (0.324)	-0.99** (0.326)
Mainline Protestant		-0.42 (0.261)	-0.46 (0.292)	-0.47 (0.294)
Black Protestant		-1.07** (0.401)	-0.45 (0.565)	-0.48 (0.566)
Catholic		-0.53* (0.254)	-0.42 (0.287)	-0.43 (0.289)
Other faith		0.16 (0.361)	0.32 (0.402)	0.34 (0.405)
Female			0.30 (0.179)	0.26 (0.182)
Age			-0.00 (0.006)	-0.01 (0.006)
Black			-0.56 (0.414)	-0.52 (0.415)
Other race			-0.78* (0.387)	-0.78* (0.389)
Income			0.05 (0.045)	0.05 (0.048)
Education			0.13*** (0.034)	0.13*** (0.035)
Politically liberal			0.13* (0.064)	0.14* (0.065)
Religious attendance			0.01 (0.038)	0.01 (0.039)
Married				0.20 (0.190)
Children				0.02 (0.063)

(continued)

**Table 3. (continued)**

Independent variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Full-time work status				-0.23 (0.202)
Constant	-1.21*** (0.146)	-0.70** (0.222)	-3.54*** (0.793)	-3.49*** (0.797)
Observations	845	845	845	845

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Reference categories: unenchanted moral schema, religiously unaffiliated, and White.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

effect, whereby the predictive validity of the moral schemas is increased on account of including more controls. Turning to the intrinsic schema, I again find positive and significant effects. Net of the controls, those who believe nature is sacred in itself are over 3 times more likely to participate in an environmental group (Model 4) than those who believe nature is not sacred. Introducing religious tradition in Model 2 has the largest effect on the intrinsic coefficient but is slight—and remains steady even after introducing factors related to demographics (Model 3) and biographical availability (Model 4).

These results show that believing nature is sacred has a positive and significant effect on the odds of participating in activism. They also show that religious tradition, demographics, and biographical availability do not wash away the independent effect of this belief on environmental activism. These results also suggest that the *reasons* for believing nature is sacred have an impact on the consistency of such activism. Thus, although believing that nature is sacred increases the odds of participation, it is those who believe it is sacred *in itself* that are most likely to be involved in multiple forms of activism. Believing nature is sacred because it is was created by God only mattered for predicting participation in an environmental group.

Given that these results are only in comparison with the unenchanted schema, we cannot know for sure that there are substantive differences between the creational and intrinsic schemas themselves. To address this issue, I conducted a postestimation Wald test for each model. As expected, I found statistically significant differences between the creational and intrinsic schemas on signing a petition ( $p = .0033$ ), giving money ( $p = .0038$ ), but not on participating in an environmental group ( $p = .859$ ).

**Table 4.** Unstandardized Coefficients From Logistic Regressions Predicting Giving Money for the Environment.

Independent variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<b>Moral schemas</b>				
Creational	-0.24 (0.197)	-0.16 (0.201)	-0.04 (0.214)	-0.02 (0.214)
Intrinsic	0.64** (0.201)	0.60** (0.203)	0.56** (0.213)	0.56** (0.214)
Unenchanted	— —	— —	— —	— —
<b>Control variables</b>				
Evangelical Protestant		-0.45 (0.274)	-0.09 (0.317)	-0.11 (0.319)
Mainline Protestant		-0.01 (0.264)	0.05 (0.295)	0.05 (0.297)
Black Protestant		-0.86* (0.418)	0.03 (0.577)	0.02 (0.579)
Catholic		-0.06 (0.256)	0.18 (0.293)	0.18 (0.294)
Other faith		0.25 (0.369)	0.52 (0.411)	0.55 (0.414)
Female			0.24 (0.173)	0.21 (0.176)
Age			-0.00 (0.005)	-0.00 (0.006)
Black			-0.63 (0.419)	-0.59 (0.422)
Other race			-0.53 (0.361)	-0.52 (0.361)
Income			0.19*** (0.057)	0.19** (0.060)
Education			0.14*** (0.033)	0.14*** (0.034)
Politically liberal			0.11 (0.063)	0.11 (0.064)
Religious attendance			-0.03 (0.038)	-0.04 (0.038)
Married				0.24 (0.185)

(continued)



**Table 4. (continued)**

Independent variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Children				-0.01 (0.062)
Full-time work status				-0.21 (0.198)
Constant	-1.17*** (0.144)	-1.03*** (0.229)	-5.66*** (0.907)	-5.53*** (0.907)
Observations	840	840	840	840

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Reference categories: unenchanted moral schema, religiously unaffiliated, and White.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## Discussion and Conclusion

This analysis provides empirical evidence that moral schemas are significantly associated with differential participation in activism—even when controlling for potentially confounding factors. This research demonstrates that the sacred/profane division matters independently of religious tradition, education, political ideology, and biographical availability. These findings are also a caution against oversimplifying the classical sacred/profane dichotomy. Scholars need to be attuned to the *sources* of sacredness, whether that is in a divine being or inherently in the object itself. As shown in this analysis, the sources of sacredness are related to differential probabilities of participation in activism. More specifically, the intrinsic belief in nature's sacredness matters most for predicting all three forms of activism, whereas the creational schema only predicted participating in an environmental group.

Why were the strongest and most consistent effects related to joining an environmental group? In a recent analysis of group cohesion and feelings of community in 50 urban communes, Vaisey (2007) finds that the strongest predictor of community was the existence of a shared moral order. That is, the people who shared the same beliefs about right and wrong, good and bad, were more likely to feel like they were part of a shared group. This suggests that individuals who are linked by a shared moral order (i.e., creational or intrinsic) are more likely to participate in groups that seek to perpetuate the concerns of this moral order. Even more recently, Ignatow (2009) finds that a shared moral culture can increase the longevity of participation in groups because shared

**Table 5.** Unstandardized Coefficients From Logistic Regressions Predicting Participation in an Environmental Group.

Independent variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<b>Moral schemas</b>				
Creational	0.87* (0.357)	0.95** (0.364)	1.07** (0.377)	1.08** (0.379)
Intrinsic	1.18** (0.370)	1.11** (0.373)	1.12** (0.382)	1.12** (0.384)
Unenchanted	— —	— —	— —	— —
<b>Control variables</b>				
Evangelical Protestant		-0.50 (0.410)	-0.39 (0.462)	-0.38 (0.465)
Mainline Protestant		-0.62 (0.428)	-0.72 (0.466)	-0.71 (0.468)
Black Protestant		-0.86 (0.608)	-0.49 (0.821)	-0.52 (0.825)
Catholic		-0.38 (0.394)	-0.28 (0.434)	-0.26 (0.436)
Other faith		0.45 (0.479)	0.65 (0.518)	0.68 (0.521)
Female			0.18 (0.266)	0.15 (0.269)
Age			0.01 (0.008)	0.01 (0.009)
Black			-0.25 (0.588)	-0.25 (0.596)
Other race			-1.22 (0.747)	-1.23 (0.748)
Income			0.04 (0.065)	0.06 (0.071)
Education			0.10* (0.049)	0.11* (0.050)
Politically liberal			-0.01 (0.094)	-0.02 (0.095)
Religious attendance			-0.04 (0.056)	-0.04 (0.056)
Married				-0.10 (0.282)
Children				0.02 (0.090)

(continued)

**Table 5. (continued)**

Independent variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Full-time work status				-0.20 (0.302)
Constant	-3.16*** (0.308)	-2.82*** (0.398)	-5.10*** (1.191)	-5.05*** (1.206)
Observations	867	867	867	867

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Reference categories: unenchanted moral schema, religiously unaffiliated, and White.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

moral orders involve important mechanisms that strengthen social bonds and create more cultural coherence. He found this to be especially true when comparing traditional religious moral culture with secular moral culture. One potential mechanism explaining why the creational schema was significant for joining a group, but not for the other modes of behavior, is the fact that this moral culture strengthens social bonds and creates cultural coherence that encourages group participation. Future research might also consider how the moral culture of these groups is related to the growing number of ecotheology groups in the 1990s and 2000s.

How do we explain the differences between the creational and intrinsic schema? If they both believe that nature is sacred, why does the creational schema yield less consistent levels of activism? This finding coincides with discoveries in prior literature on religion and activism showing that religious beliefs can be *both* a motivator and inhibitor of activism (Harris, 1999; Marx, 1964; Smith, 1996). On one hand, individuals who attribute nature’s sacredness to God may draw on powerful transcendent moral motivation to act in nature’s behalf—to protect God’s sacred creation. On the other hand, the same belief can lead individuals to acquiesce—to believe that nature is in God’s hands or that the earth is a temporary home. In virtue of these countervailing arguments, these mixed results should not be very surprising to sociologists who study religion.

One potential objection to this article’s findings has to do with the causal direction of the relationship between moral beliefs and environmental action. The possible objection is that activism leads individuals to adopt moral beliefs about nature being sacred, rather than vice versa. Although conceivable in some cases, I argue that this objection does not invalidate my findings. First,

prior research on the cultural foundations of civic and political activism (e.g., Jasper, 1999; Jasper & Poulsen, 1995; Sherkat & Ellison, 2007; Smith, 1996) has shown that beliefs can, and do, motivate action. Second, recent work in cultural sociology uses cognitive science to show how moral schemas motivate human action, rather than simply providing some sort of loose justification for action after the fact (Vaisey, 2008, 2009; also see Smith, 2003). Last, scholars studying environmental concern and behavior routinely show how values and beliefs influence activism (Dietz et al., 1998; Dunlap & Van Liere, 1978; Dunlap, Van Liere, Mertig, & Jones, 2000; Kempton et al., 1995).

### *Implications for Future Research*

The main finding of this article that moral schemas affect differential participation is an important contribution to research on civic and political activism, especially as it pertains to the cultural elements that play into the mobilization process. This finding is a step forward toward better theories about the role of cultural and moral ideologies in civic and political participation more broadly. Although this article focuses exclusively on the moral dimensions of nature to make this claim, future research should explore how moral beliefs about the sacredness of space, human persons, or other aspects of our physical and social world might come to bear on differential participation in other movements. McAdam and Paulsen (1993) consider how identity interacts with preexisting networks and other structural factors related to participation. Following this type of study, future work in social movement research on environmental activism and moral schemas might also do well to interact with other prominent explanations of differential participation. For example, how does biographical availability (Barkan et al., 1995; McAdam, 1986), frame alignment (Snow & Benford, 1988), or the sequential process of mobilization (Beyerlein & Hipp, 2006; Klandermans, 1997) interact with moral schemas? I explore this question to some extent, using the control variables above, but a more sophisticated analysis is in order.

These results also have important empirical implications for how we understand and research the human–environment relationship. The theoretical foundation of this article stems from qualitative (Durkheim, 1912; Kempton et al., 1995; Smith, 2003) as well as quantitative work (Jasper, 1999; Jasper & Poulsen, 1995; Sherkat & Ellison 2007). Future research on moral schemas and environmental activism should indeed incorporate both perspectives. On one hand, moral beliefs operate beneath the surface, meaning that people have a difficult time recounting their motivation for action. Thus, a survey is a

helpful way to capture such information because respondents may be “better able to pick themselves out of the proverbial lineup than to describe themselves to a sociological sketch artist” (Vaisey, 2009, p. 1705). On the other hand, qualitative interviews offer unparalleled richness and depth not captured in fixed-response surveys. This article provides the former, by being the first to use quantitative data to sketch out the broad contours of moral schemas and differential participation as they relate to the environment. To deepen this theory, future empirical research ought to examine how moral schemas shape participation through in-depth interviews, ethnography, and participant observation.

Although this study suggests that individuals holding a moral schema predict different types of activism, it does not explain how such moral schemas are activated. Scholars working in social psychology, in conjunction with the cognitive sciences, have used experimental methods to develop theories that are relevant to the findings here (e.g., Haidt, 2002). For example, those who believe that nature is sacred (intrinsic or creational), might be more likely to feel “awe” toward the environment, which may in turn encourage prosocial behavior. Other work in the area of environmental psychology has suggested that the emotion of empathy might be a mechanism explaining the link between moral reasoning and environmental behavior (Berenguer, 2010). Another study might investigate the different emotions felt by the different moral schemas when presented with an environmental dilemma. Are individuals with a creational schema activated by different emotions than individuals with an intrinsic schema? Future engagement with this line of work may provide important clues about the mechanisms driving the connection between moral schemas and environmental behavior by investigating the cognitive contexts in which these moral beliefs are activated.

To conclude, in this article, I have attempted to advance our understanding about why some people, but not others, participate in environmental activism. To do this, I link recent work on the cultural and moral dimensions of activism with work on the environment, being the first to examine empirically how moral beliefs about the sacredness of the environment affect participation in environmental activism. To make this argument, I rely on Durkheim’s foundational theory about the moral power of sacred beliefs—noting how these beliefs are more universal and not necessarily tied to institutional forms of religion. I am not offering a complete theory of differential participation; rather, I propose an important and neglected cultural component of participation. There are many kinds of reasons why people participate in activism, which have been well theorized in previous work. But, as I argue here, there are other factors that can influence participation. Discussions of moral

worldviews in general are rare (but see Jasper, 1999; Maurer 2002; Mika, 2006; Nepstad, 2004, 2008; Sherkat & Ellison, 2007; Smith, 1996), and even rarer in work on environmental activism. But as scholars continue to incorporate these cultural dimensions into their work, we will generate better theories about the array of factors explaining why some, but not others, take action to protect the environment.

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