Enchantment and its uses: religion and spirituality in environmental direct action

Introduction

What are the uses of enchantment? From an anarchist perspective, are forms of spiritual belief and practice always to be considered as a surrendering of personal autonomy, an enslavement to irrationality? We will suggest otherwise – that spirituality can be a source of personal empowerment. Our title contains an implicit reference to Bruno Bettelheim, who argued that fairy tales were useful for children, in that they contributed to their psychological development (Bettelheim, 1976). While we will not take a similarly psychological route in defence of eco-spirituality – with the implication that spiritual beliefs cannot be true but only useful – we make here a parallel argument: we believe that spiritual forms of belief and action empower individuals in the life of protest.

Firstly, we will introduce environmental direct action, particularly as it developed in Britain in the 1990s for specific political and cultural reasons. Secondly, we will explore the tensions between the spiritual and the secular in this movement, in the context of a critique, broadly shared within the movement, of mainstream Western religion as hierarchical and ecologically malign. Thirdly, drawing on detailed qualitative research regarding environmental direct activists in the 1990s,¹ we argue that, despite these struggles over religion, activists routinely draw on cultural resources in order to give meaning to their values, identities and actions in forms that are – sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly – religious in nature. We explore the uses of this ‘de-regulated religion’ in three different dimensions of direct action, namely beliefs, identity and action.

The environmental direct action movement

During the 1990s in the United Kingdom there emerged a new wave of direct action against activities considered to be environmentally destructive. In particular, the issue of road building attracted the attention of activists and heralded a number of lengthy battles with local authorities, the police and construction

companies. Examples include the M3 extension at Twyford Down (1991–93) and the M11 extension in East London (1993). At the time, these activities received high levels of media attention and it became common for newspaper front pages to bear pictures of dreadlocked protesters being dragged from trees by security guards or police (Szerszynski, 2003). Other protests sprang up around the country in objection to perceived environmental threats, such as housing schemes or open cast mining (for a useful overview, see Seel *et al.*, 2000).

In many ways reminiscent of the anti-nuclear protests of the 1970s and 80s, the core of many of these protests was the existence of semi-permanent camps. Activists, frequently having little or no previous contact with the area, set up camp with the aim of physically stopping whatever activity they objected to, building tree houses and digging tunnels to prevent road contractors from clearing wooded areas (see Wall, 2000, for a useful analysis of different kinds of direct action). While social protest for the protection of the environment was not a new phenomenon in the United Kingdom, the scale of activity and the emergence of ‘communities of direct action’ added a new chapter to British environmental history. A sector of society had decided that the usual channels of political lobbying and Party politics had been ineffective in securing any substantial indication that the environment was to become a priority in national politics.

By the end of the 1990s, although never completely dying out, this type of environmental protest had become less common and media interest in it had diminished. The large-scale actions against road building, for instance, had become virtually unheard of by the time that Labour beat the Conservative Party in the 1997 general election. Prior to the Labour victory, there had been a shift in the Tory policy on road building and a number of proposed projects were halted while others were abandoned, signalling to activists that their innovative and sustained campaign had achieved some degree of success. Since then, much of the energy that was channelled into environmental direct action has been directed into campaigns against ‘genetically modified’ crops and for the anti-capitalist and anti-globalisation movement which has been growing since the protests against the 1999 World Trade Organisation meeting in Seattle.

Environmental direct action in the 1990s was well known for its emphasis upon non-violence to humans (although not to property). Moreover, the communities that developed were important in that, although they physically represented an impediment to road building, they were also significant in themselves. It was not the case that activists put in a good day’s protesting and then returned to their ordinary lives: for many, the community was their life. However, by their very nature, direct action communities were temporary and transitory: people came and went; some stayed for one night; others were more involved in organising the protest on a day-to-day basis and lived there for the duration. Some communities were highly organised with meal times, work schedules and frequent meetings; others were less integrated, with individuals or small groups acting more or less autonomously.

This radical environmental network was maintained largely by word of

mouth, freely distributed printed literature and a circuit of festivals and gatherings which individuals attended throughout the year. Beyond this active maintenance of the movement, activists were bound together by both a distrust of mainstream politics and a belief that the environment needed protecting. For activists, the Earth was of ‘ultimate concern’ (Tillich, 1957), the protection of the environment being the ultimate goal underpinning the movement. Whilst for some activists the ‘ultimacy’ of the Earth was simply a symbol of a wider political struggle against the forces of capitalism, for others this ‘ultimacy’ of the Earth was expressed in spiritual terms: actions were rooted, metaphorically, in ‘sacred ground’ (Taylor, 1997b). Through religious forms of action such as rituals and ceremonies, activists with an explicitly ‘spiritual’ self-understanding sought to aid the battle against environmental destruction. It is in these kind of actions that the religious dimensions of this form of protest politics are most apparent – yet, as we argue below, the ‘uses’ of religion and spirituality within the movement go beyond these most visible manifestations, and perform various roles in the maintenance and activity of the movement.

Religion and irreligion in direct action

It may seem counterintuitive to try to draw links between environmental direct action movement and religion. Like other anarchist-inspired social movements, direct activists are generally disaffiliated from and critical of many mainstream values and institutions, including those of religion. As such, environmental direct action might be seen as a form of *irreligion*, as a reaction against the traditional forms of authority and belief that the churches exemplify. Following Ulrich Beck’s analysis of the emergence of what he calls ‘reflexive modernity’, one might see the rise of environmental critique as a manifestation of what he terms a second Reformation, as individuals are increasingly ‘set free from the certainties and modes of living of the industrial epoch – just as they were “freed” from the arms of the Church into society in the age of the Reformation’ (Beck, 1992: 14). According to this interpretation, unthinking trust of and deference towards authority is increasingly undermined by individualisation and secularisation, so that scientific claims and political decisions are not simply accepted due to their originating from experts, but are subjected to stringent social critique and contestation. According to this analysis, anarchist thought and practice in general and environmental direct action in particular might be seen as at the vanguard of a new round of secularisation, as quasi-religious deference towards expertise is replaced by more contestatory, critical and active forms of citizenship.

However, as has been argued by writers such as Norman Cohn (1970) and Murray Bookchin (1982), the history of anarchism is interwoven with that of religious movements such as millenarianism. The beliefs and practices of such movements have provided important cultural resources for challenging the

accepted dualistic codings of a dominant social order – between how things are and how things could be, between private and public actions, between leaders and led (Purkis, 2000: 107–8; Szerszynski, 2002: 56). Furthermore, just as was the case with earlier forms of anti-ritualism and iconoclasm in religious history, environmental direct action has developed its own rituals, symbols and narratives. Whilst these may not be understood by the activists as ‘religion’, nevertheless pockets of ritualised action and mythic forms of understanding are important features of the movement (Szerszynski, 2002).

A key term used to capture this dimension of the movement’s praxis is ‘spirituality’, a term increasingly used by individuals in Western societies to denote a belief in ‘something more’ than the empirical, material world while at the same time avoiding what are seen as the stultifying features of traditional ‘religion’ (see Taylor, 2001). Zinnbauer *et al.* (1997) conducted a survey of 346 individuals from a wide range of religious backgrounds into whether they saw themselves as ‘spiritual’ or ‘religious’. They found that those who saw themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious’ ‘rejected traditional organised religion in favour of an individualised spirituality that includes mysticism along with New Age beliefs and practices’ (p. 561). They conclude that ‘*religiousness* is increasingly characterised as “narrow and institutional”, and *spirituality* is increasingly characterised as “personal and subjective”’ (p. 563).

This analysis is consistent with that of Woodhead and Heelas (2000), who argue that the religions and spiritualities that are faring best are those which help to resource the individual, that are concerned more with the here and now than with the afterlife, and that nurture the unique, individual, lived life rather than simply promoting life in a particular prescribed social role. Whilst support for the Christian church is in decline, there is evidence to suggest that many people are turning to a style of religion that allows them to choose the beliefs, practices and lifestyles that feel right for them. Thus, via a process of *bricolage*, individuals select, borrow and interpret diverse religious symbols and ideas for novel purposes (Beckford, 1990; Roof, 1999).²

Many environmental direct activists articulate their spiritual commitment to direct action in terms of a belief in the sacredness of the Earth. It is common for them to refer to the Earth as ‘Mother’, the ‘Goddess’ or simply the divine. However, in general, activists are strongly against ‘religion’ and prefer to call themselves ‘spiritual’, blaming Christianity for the environmental crisis because of its separation of man from nature. By contrast, activists see themselves as adopting styles of spirituality that stress the interconnectedness of the divine with humanity and the natural world. A female protester at the Buddha Field Festival expressed her doubts about ‘religion’, ‘I could see the same mistakes being made again and again . . . I worship wherever I am even if it is concrete.’ She saw religious traditions as having lost an idea of the sacred, and as relying on hierarchy, exclusion and dishonesty.

Just as with Zinnbauer *et al.*’s (1997) respondents, the ‘personal and subjective’ nature of direct activists’ understandings of spirituality means that it is

often used to describe their experience and way of life without any explicit reference to what may be considered as the usual indicators of religiosity, such as the divine, the supernatural or the afterlife. This is echoed by Bloch, who argues that, 'simple, daily life actions to preserve the Earth could be viewed as "spiritual" activities' (Bloch, 1998: 59). Whereas activists identified 'religion' with the discrete, established, traditional religious systems, spirituality' was frequently used by protesters to describe their entire way of life and social vision. The line between the secular and the sacred was often difficult to draw, with activists frequently choosing to use similar language and to value particular symbols whether or not they considered themselves an explicitly spiritual person (Deudney, 1995; Taylor, 1996).

In their suspicion of mainstream religion, direct activists echoed the main thrust of the academic literature on environment and religion which dates back to the 1967 article 'The historical roots of our ecological crisis' by the historian Lynn White Jr. This seminal essay traced responsibility for the environmental crisis back to the displacement of paganism by Christianity, arguing that the latter religion's emphasis on the transcendence of God over creation (and by extension of humanity over nature) desecralised nature and opened the way for human beings to transform and domesticate nature. In this literature it is commonly argued that non-Christian religious cultures – whether animistic (Native American), pantheistic (Ancient Greek) or monistic (Buddhist or Taoist) – view nature as sacred and are therefore far more cautious and respectful in their dealings with the natural world (see Gottlieb, 1996 for a selection of such readings).³ This 'critical environmental discourse' is popular within the environmental direct action movement, which shares many characteristics with a New Age religious outlook (Heelas, 1996) as well as with the more secular 'anarchistic' tendencies of many new social movements.

However, there are many within the movement who believe that spiritual ritual and symbolism detract from serious political engagement with the issues. At one Earth First! gathering a disagreement broke out during a group meeting. About fifty people were present, sitting in a circle discussing the pros and cons of non-violent direct action. At the summation of the meeting, one participant suggested that everyone praise the 'Mother' and he began a song to the 'Earth Goddess'. This was greeted with some ridicule, and resulted in the departure of a number of participants who felt that it was all a bit 'silly' and unnecessary. This did not deter the singers who continued their worship.

Clearly, despite the widely shared critique of Western 'religion' within the movement, there are differences over the relevance of explicit 'spirituality' to political activism. Nevertheless, as we argue below, even the more apparently 'secular' wing of the direct action movement is amenable to analysis in religious terms.

For both the spiritual and the non-spiritual within the movement, a critique of Western religions of transcendence frequently accompanies a strongly felt identification with cultures considered to exemplify holistic and environmentally friendly lifestyles. Those protesters who are explicitly spiritual in their

approach to protecting the Earth are attracted to the religious traditions of cultures who lived 'close to nature' such as Native America Indian traditions or other 'tribal' or 'Eastern' cultures, thus developing a form of 'Do It Yourself' religion that has become a common style of religiosity in contemporary Western society. However, even for those who are not explicitly spiritual, lifestyles, dress and professed values frequently echo an allegiance to 'tribal' or pre-industrial cultures across the globe, in an effort to turn away from capitalism and to 'regain' some of the simplicity of pre-industrial lifestyles (Szszszynski, 1997, 2003).

Religion as a cultural resource

Within this general context of creative ambivalence about religion, we perceive that religious forms of action and thought are used as a resource for sustaining the involvement of the individual and the group within the movement. Direct action pushes individuals to their physical and psychological limits. Protesters tread a precarious path between positive personal transformation and achievement and serious risk to mental and physical health, or 'burn-out'. Many employ direct action tactics such as lock-ons, walkways, tunnels and tripods, putting themselves at risk to disrupt and delay construction work (Doherty, 2000). Against the background of these disincentives to participation, the motivation to remain involved is often more than a rational, intellectual response to deteriorating environments and the social injustices thus generated; it is also often deeply emotional (Milton, 2002).

This perhaps partly explains why a strong element of spirituality emerges within the direct action movement. As Deudney suggests, 'appeals to higher self-interest or long-run self-interest may be insufficient to motivate sufficient action. The appeal of Earth religion is that it helps motivate behaviour respectful of the Earth that otherwise would be difficult to achieve' (1995: 290). We believe that religious resources such as myths, quasi-religious self-understandings and ritual action operate partly as what Michel Foucault (1988) calls 'technologies of the self'. Although much of Foucault's work analyses the production of selves by forms of expert knowledge – the way that administrative procedures and institutions such as medicine, law and the Catholic confession produce certain kinds of subjectivity in people – in his later work he also became interested in techniques whereby people work on and transform their *own* subjectivities. From such a perspective, spirituality in the direct action movement can be seen as an ensemble of technologies of the self, ones which shape protesters' subjectivities to fit them for a life of resistance and protest.⁴

In this section of the chapter we identify three dimensions to this 'use of enchantment' within the environmental direct action movement: firstly, the language which protesters use to express the core beliefs of the 'figured world' of environmental direct action; secondly, the way protesters understand their

own identities; and thirdly, the way that forms of action are used to express and reinforce movement commitment and belonging.

Beliefs, myths and values

Alberto Melucci (1989, 1996) has argued that social movements act as social laboratories, enclaves of experimentation within which individuals enact different 'forms of life' that contest and alter society's dominant codes. Movements offer their own 'figured worlds', in which participants can come to experience the world in a particular but shared way (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain, 1998). Sometimes the shared understandings of the world take explicit 'religious' form, but, even when they do not, they lend themselves to analysis in religious terms. For instance, most religious traditions have developed means for adherents to distinguish themselves from the outside world, from those who do not belong to the tradition. Similarly, direct activists frequently refer to society as 'Babylon', the name for the spiritually bereft exile of the ancient Hebrews and more recently the Rastafarian term of derision for Western society. Babylon is used not only in a substantive sense but also adjectivally: for example, 'Babylon drugs' (Western medicine) or 'Babylon press' (mainstream media). In line with previous uses of the term, this suggests that something was felt to be lacking in 'straight' society that could be found in the exiled group and, at the most basic level, this missing element could be seen as a lack of awareness of the 'ultimate' significance (or even sacredness) of the Earth. However, there also exists a very strong feeling amongst activists that 'Babylon' is oppressive and that mainstream society with its hierarchies and consumerist culture subdues and traps the individual.

Another, 'implicitly religious' theme is the tendency for activists to articulate the status of the movement in mythic form.⁵ Particularly popular are myths concerning the dawning of a 'new age', often described in terms of a battle between the forces of good (the protesters) and the forces of evil (the government, capitalism, globalisation) or 'Babylon'. For example, a male activist in his mid-fifties interviewed at the Wandsworth 'Ecovillage' explained how the movement had been 'called by the Mother Earth' to fight in a cosmic battle to save the planet from the forces of greed and evil which dominate society. He saw the fight to save the planet as not just a material struggle, but as a spiritual quest, linked to fundamental issues concerning the nature of human existence. Many other activists similarly tended towards such a mystical and soteriological interpretation of their actions.

In particular, certain Native American myths which prophesy the dawning of a new age were recounted within the movement. One popular myth prophesies that a time will come when children of the white people will come and seek the wisdom of the 'Elders', wearing long hair and beads. This will signal a time of purification. Another Native American myth, retold on a number of occasions, involves a prophecy surrounding the birth of a female white buffalo that will

signal the proximity of world peace and the dawning of a new era – a sign of rejuvenation. Many protesters tended to talk about the emergence of the movement in such prophetic terms, as if it were inevitable. For such individuals the environmental direct action movement was part of a millenarian rejuvenation. Indeed, some activists believed that the white buffalo had been born (on 20 August 1994 in Janesville, Wisconsin, on Heider Farm) and that the world was therefore on the cusp of change.

Some writers have expressed concern over the adoption and adaptation of myths from other cultures.⁶ Such concerns aside, such myths clearly play an important role in the understanding of movement members of themselves as agents of ecological defence. Such meta-narratives of ecological decline and renewal help to connect the times of protesters' own concrete actions with the more abstract time of 'world-historical transformation' (Jasper, 1997: 22; Szerszynski, 2002). The identification of activists with oppressed groups such as Native Americans also serves to ground their identity as a revolutionary and emancipatory force in a much wider 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983), seeing themselves as part of a wider resurgence of oppressed groups reasserting their values and way of life in the face of the homogenising forces of global capitalism.

Identity, conversion and personal transformation

In order for movement membership to play a significant role in participants' lives, it has to become a meaningful and significant part of whom they take themselves to be – their *identity*. Identity is shaped by the experience of practice (see the next subsection), by an oppositional stance to the wider world, and can be grounded in mythic meta-narratives (see the last subsection – 'Activism and non-violence'). However, identity is also understood in terms of personal narrative, and in the context of social movements, the biographical narrative is generally a discontinuist one, where the narration of their passage from pre-movement life to movement involvement is an important way in which individuals situate their present selves (on conversion in religious movements, see Lofland, 1966). As James Jasper argues, once individuals are part of a social movement, they tend to rewrite their personal biography, using the narrative of their own conversion not just as a straightforward description of past events, but as a symbolic resource to affirm their alignment with movement values (Jasper, 1997: 82). Whether overtly spiritual or not, activists frequently talk about their entry into the movement in terms of a conversion experience. Many activists experience their conversion to a new set of values and responsibilities as a revelation, of something to which they were previously blind. This life-changing moment or phase is arguably a factor central to the ability of activists to hold values which often put them at odds with mainstream society and to engage in activities which may endanger their safety or place them in breach of the law.

Protesters' belief in the possibility of persuading others to change is partly

grounded in the examples of personal transformation experienced within the movement. As one female protester at the Big Green Gathering admitted: 'If I really thought that people still wouldn't care even if they knew the facts then I would drop out of society and become more Buddhist or meditative. The social protest movement really believes people will change. People who are involved are transformed.' Protesters revelled in stories about 'locals' who remained involved and interested in direct action even when the protest in their locality was over. A female activist who had been involved in the M11 anti-road protest in East London excitedly explained that there had been some 'suburban housewives' in Wanstead who were affected by the proposed road plans and joined the protesters in objection: 'they are still wandering around dressed like hippies a year after everyone has gone and they are still political, like fighting the CJA.⁷ People wake up, the most unlikely people, suburban housewives!'

Personal accounts of transformation and conversion are invariably spoken of in highly emotional terms. Many activists attested to the fact that taking part in direct action had changed their lives. At the Earth First! Gathering, Joe explained that it was through the protests against the (then proposed) Criminal Justice Act in 1994 that he had first become involved in direct action and had lived at many protest sites including Newbury and Wandsworth. However, he said that now he cannot imagine living any other way; direct action had become a way of life, his way of life. Similarly Green Dave stressed that 'I've never been happier or healthier' since adopting this lifestyle. Protesters attest not only to a sense of satisfaction from feeling that they are contributing to positive social change but also claim that they benefit from the personal challenge. There is an atmosphere of immediacy amongst protesters, a sense that their political stance, both in terms of lifestyle and forms of action, is necessary in order to save the planet from environmental destruction.

Action, healing and ceremony

Religion is not just about the cognition and articulation of certain beliefs and values; it is also about action. Similarly, activities within the environmental direct action movement of the 1990s also served to confirm and validate key movement meanings. Here we explore three different kinds of action in this way: healing, worship and celebration, and direct action protest itself.

Healing

Gatherings attended by activists tended to include a 'healing area' where a wide range of therapies including homeopathy, *reiki*, acupuncture and crystal healing, as well as spiritual disciplines from Paganism, to Buddhism and the Hare Krishna were on offer. As the programme for the 1996 Big Green Gathering explains:

In this 1996 Big Green Gathering we in the healing area will be coming together to celebrate and enhance the joy of life, but also to recognise ourselves as witness to

the deterioration of our environment which threatens the quality and even the very fabric of life itself. As consciousness and self-awareness increases we will be able to learn and grow together in an atmosphere of loving support.

One Earth First! Gathering offered a number of workshops on health issues, including 'Camp Living and its Attendant Diseases' (which involved the sharing of experiences on how to live in a camp and stay healthy, first-aid, self-defence sessions, discussions on how to avoid 'burn-out' and information on diet and the effects of toxic pollutants). Additionally, the gathering had a formal healing area, a space at the centre of the field within which a large bender had been erected where individuals ran sessions on Earth healing and meditation as well as offering massage and other therapies.

Many activists had made protest sites their homes, often for months on end, living with the constant anxiety that at any moment their tree houses, benders or whole communities could be demolished. Coupled with the personal investment in the cause itself, the stress of this lifestyle brought immense pressure to bear upon individuals. It was not uncommon for people to become depressed and dependent, with alcoholism and drug abuse emerging as serious problems within the movement. Activists highlighted the importance of attending gatherings and festivals as an opportunity to 'chill out' away from the pressures of the eco-battlefield and this is also a reason given for the existence of healing areas or 'sacred' spaces at such events as well as within protest communities. The protest movement cannot survive if individuals are unbalanced or out of touch with themselves and lose sight of their goals.

The 'return' to traditional or holistic healing arts can be seen as a broader reaction within this alternative community against contemporary Western medicine, which is considered to concentrate on the physical at the expense of the other aspects of human nature. 'Alternative' traditional methods stress that healing cannot be successful unless it considers the whole person. Healing, in this broad sense, is considered by many to be fundamental to the underlying ethos and ultimate success of the movement. For example, at the Earth First! Gathering, Ash, a woman in her twenties expressed concern about the health of members of the direct action movement and felt that it was an area needing attention. One of her primary interests was making people more aware of camp illnesses, including visitors to protest sites, and in encouraging people to take better care of themselves. She also drew attention to the stresses of a life of protest and the fact that people often drink too much in order to block out the pain of evictions. She was training in *reiki*, learning about different herbal remedies ('as most people are shy of Babylon drugs') and attempting to introduce health as a serious issue into the camps where she stayed.

Some rituals were considered to have a direct power to heal the Earth. 'Eco-magic' or Earth healing aims to access the divine powers inherent in nature and the individual, and to direct them towards healing the Earth. A session at an Earth First! Gathering, called 'Healing Ourselves Healing the Planet' was organised by three local female healers. They built an altar at the centre of a bender

with flowers and candles arranged upon it and invited us all (there were about twenty people present) to sit in a circle and begin meditating. The guided healing ritual required us to visualise a bright light, allowing it to enter at the top of the head and to bathe the whole body. The light was then allowed to pass out of the head and progressively fill the room, the world, the planet, the cosmos. Finally, this energy was visualised as spreading from the centre of the Earth to its surface and filling the rocks, the plants, the animals and people. This ritual reflects the belief that humanity not only has the capacity to destroy nature but also directly to heal nature. For the healers this was seen as a necessary and important element in saving the environment, reflecting the interconnectedness of creation not only in terms of a physical link but also through an energy pervading everything.

Worship and celebration

Many of the rituals at gatherings and protest sites served not so much to heal as to reaffirm common values. At the 1996 Big Green Gathering, a group called 'Tree Spirit' organised a tree planting ceremony where thirteen trees associated with the eight seasonal festivals were blessed in preparation for planting as a sacred grove. Celebration of the eight seasonal festivals and the thirteen annual full moons are popular amongst activists, and individuals may travel to sacred sites or conduct their own rituals at protest camps. However, there was no set formula: celebration during these periods involved anything from a big party to carefully planned rituals and prayers. The ceremony included praise to the Goddess and to the spirits of each tree as an expression the re-sacralisation of nature. According to Glennie Kindred, a founder member of Tree Spirit,

throughout the world, trees have been revered as divine sources of wisdom and worshipped as deities. The ancient people believed that trees were sacred and contained a spirit who could be talked to. There are many documentations of ceremonies for felling trees, warning the tree spirit, or asking for its forgiveness. Trees were honoured and thanked for their gifts and treated with respect and awe. (Kindred, 1995: 3)

Shortly after the tree planting ritual there was a Druidic ritual at a nearby set of standing stones, erected during the previous gathering, and in a far corner of the healing area followers of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) were chanting. Many individuals attended all the above rituals as general expressions of Earth spirituality, as re-affirming the sacredness of the Earth.

Activism and nonviolence

Activism itself was also considered by some individuals as a ritual expressing love and respect for the Earth. As such, environmental protest activity is largely nonviolent. In general, protesters would not deliberately use physically violent strategies in the course of their actions. This is one of the features of environmental protest that for many observers locates it clearly in the Western anarchist

tradition, which distinguishes itself from other forms of revolutionary politics by its conviction that means should always be consistent with goals, and that action should be 'prefigurative'. As one activist, Josh, argued, 'social transformation requires personal transformation. We need to become the type of person we would like to live in our communities.' Activists also often justify nonviolence in contrast to Babylon, which, as mentioned previously, is considered to use aggressive means to control nature and humanity. If physical violence is used then the protesters would be playing by Babylon's rules; if Babylon is to be fundamentally challenged, then alternative, nonviolent strategies must be employed.

However, activists also refer to the example of Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian idea of *ahimsa* (nonviolence or non-harm). Gandhi extended this traditional Indian teaching to the domain of political protest where he emphasised that fighting the aggressors, the British, with their own tactics, violence, was not as effective as approaching them nonviolently. It could be argued that Gandhi resorted to this traditional idea as a strategic measure because his followers did not have the resources to wage a violent battle against the colonial army and indeed this is suggested by some activists as a good reason to adopt a nonviolent approach. However, Gandhi's freedom movement drew great support and was eventually successful in bringing about an independent India. Despite the suggestion of this as a tactical move, it is generally believed that the movement was at least partially successful because of its adherence to the spiritual teaching of *ahimsa* (Chapple, 1995; Gupta, 1995).

Conclusion

Environmental direct action shares with organised religion the characteristic of reflecting what Paul Tillich (1957) called the 'ultimate concern' of the individual. Whilst for some activists their ultimate concern is articulated in a secular way, for many others it is expressed in the language of spirituality, in terms of belief in the sacredness of the Earth or of love for the Mother Earth goddess. We have argued that this internal diversity within the direct action movement is an intensified form of broader 'spiritual' critiques of organised religion in many sectors of wider society, in which 'religion' is seen as connoting the formulaic and the oppressive, and 'spirituality' is used to refer to beliefs and practices seen as expressing and nurturing the individual, lived life. Virtually all activists share this critique of 'religion', but only some see explicit 'spirituality' as a desired alternative.

However, we went on to suggest that, across this spectrum within the direct action movement, there is a widespread use of religious forms of belief and action to 'resource' groups and individuals in their commitment to the protest cause, to shape their subjectivities for the life of protest. Firstly, we looked at the way that certain forms of belief about the movement and wider society serve to express and sustain their sense of calling to a higher cause. Secondly, we explored

the importance of conversion and a sense of personal transformation for the maintenance of commitment amongst movement members. Thirdly, we discussed how the performance of practices such as healing, ceremony and direct action are fundamental to maintaining the strength of the movement.

We opened with one reference to the term ‘enchantment’, that of Bruno Bettelheim. However, it was Max Weber, who first gave us the term ‘the disenchantment of the world’, *die Entzauberung der Welt*. He used the phrase to describe the way that, in modern societies, people withdraw from public life into the private sphere in accordance with their substantive ‘core’ values, leaving public life to be organised around notions of instrumental rationality and bureaucratic efficiency (Weber, 1989: 14, 30). Although Weber lamented some of the side-effects of this dis-enchantment, he was enough of an Enlightenment thinker to nevertheless see it as a necessary part of human progress and emancipation. Anarchist writers – Murray Bookchin (1982) included – have largely aligned themselves with this tradition of thought, one that sees progressive forces in society as always on the side of the secular against the religious or spiritual. Using the example of environmental direct action, we have argued that the story is more complex, that forms of enchantment can have their uses, in constituting subjects suitable for civil disobedience in defence of the Earth.

Notes

- 1 The ethnographic material in this chapter is based on fieldwork undertaken by Emma Tomalin from May to October 1996 at a protest sites and related gatherings and festivals: the Wandsworth ‘Eco-village’ (South London, May–October 1996); the ‘Big Green Gathering’ (24–28 July 1996, Longbridge Deverill, Wiltshire); the ‘Buddha Field Festival’ (17–20 July 1996, near Shepton Mallet, Somerset); and an Earth First! Gathering (12–15 June 1996, North Wales) (see Tomalin (2000)). Activists’ names have been changed.
- 2 The term ‘*bricolage*’ in anthropology was originated by Levi-Strauss (1962). For a useful discussion of the general phenomenon of *bricolage* in social movements, see Hetherington (1998: 28; 2000: 98–9).
- 3 The accuracy of this view is doubtful. Whilst many cultures have religious practices or teachings associated with the natural world, such traditions of *nature religion* ought to be distinguished from *religious environmentalism*. Religious environmentalism is limited because it is a product of Western ideas about nature, in particular a ‘romantic’ vision of nature as a realm of purity and aesthetic value. Although in India, for example, people worship certain trees, this is not evidence of an inherent environmental awareness if only because such practices are very ancient and predate concerns about a global environmental crisis (Tomalin, 2002; Milton, 1996; Pederson, 1995).
- 4 Cruikshank (1999) considers various forms of participatory democracy in order to argue that, while they ostensibly seem to empower the powerless, they in fact serve as technologies of the self which at once create and regulate governable citizens. By contrast, the spiritual technologies of the self explored here, we argue, are less amenable to such a critical reading.

- 5 Such mythmaking is of course a perennial feature of political communities (see Anderson (1983); Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983)).
- 6 These myths do have their origins in Native American culture, but the form in which activists know them originates in the 'Rainbow Family', an alternative social movement originating in the United States in the early 1970s, originally influenced by Native American traditions which were later overlaid by elements of European Paganism as the movement spread to Europe (Niman, 1997). Niman is concerned at the way that the Rainbows 'have written themselves into Hopi prophecies' (p. 134), considering this process as tantamount to 'ethnocide' (p. 146). By contrast, Taylor argues that this process is unexceptional in religious life: 'some cross-cultural borrowing, reciprocal influencing and blending is an inevitable aspect of religious life – thus at least some of the hand-wringing over appropriation and syncretic processes is misplaced and over broad' (1997: 206).
- 7 In the United Kingdom, the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (1995) criminalised most forms of direct action.