Religions, philosophies, and ethics have shaped the cultural worlds in which we live, and continue to construct how we interpret and respond to social problems. The social and ecological imperatives of sustainability pose complex and comprehensive challenges to cultures and global society. Interpreting those challenges well requires understanding the moral traditions of the world, ancient and emerging. Building effective responses to those challenges requires learning how to engage with their moral resources, converse with their participants, and imagine new cultural possibilities. The Spirit of Sustainability, the first of ten volumes that will comprise the Berkshire Encyclopedia of Sustainability, intends to help readers identify and begin to explore the moral dimensions of sustainability.

Within these pages scholars from many disciplines introduce and explain key concepts, major traditions, and significant practices relevant to thinking about sustainability. The contributors cover topics that range widely across cultures and traditions, presenting readers with a lexicon of available and diverse vocabularies of sustainability. It is not, however, the lexicon of a shared discourse. Because these authors work from multiple academic fields and represent various traditions, they have differing and sometimes competing views; sustainability indeed absorbs disparate ideas, values, and projects, many of which vie for inclusion in contemporary thought and public conversation. This volume therefore offers a pluralist selection of articles related to one another by their significance for sustainability—a pluralist and contested concept in itself.

Rather than impose a master definition of the term “sustainability,” we invited contributors to explain how their topic matters for making sense of sustainability’s ambiguity and multiplicity. Some articles explore practices that may help interpret what sustainable living means; some enumerate goals that sustainability must include. Others introduce moral traditions or interpretive frameworks that can help us reason through the combined challenge of meeting those goals. A number of articles charge us with examining received notions of sustainability, or ask us to consider how sustainability challenges received notions of other social goals.

So while unavoidably partial, this volume represents the depth and breadth of the basic question at hand: what must we sustain? The Spirit of Sustainability invites students, general readers, scholars, and professionals to reflect on sustainability as a moral problem. Sometimes we avoid or truncate moral issues in sustainability discussions and—seeking the least controversial, most feasible steps forward—restrict ourselves to talk of market policies, political strategies, and technological possibilities. But deciding what we can and must sustain finally confronts the collective moral capacities of humanity. It tests what we might call the human spirit.

Sustainability as Moral Challenge

Encouraging contributors to reflect on morality and explore the realm of spirit may strike some as inviting trouble, more trouble than it is worth. Religion and ethics present perennial difficulties to public discussion—difficulties compounded when the public is global in extent. Debates over the good, let alone divine will or cosmic destiny, can easily divide pluralist cultures and frustrate collective responsibility. Indeed, liberal societies confront their social challenges first through existing market, political, and technological systems, in part because they want to avoid destabilizing moral debates.

But the challenge of sustainability begs for an evaluation of those systems. Consider again the basic question: what must we sustain? It arises because humanity’s organization of economic, political, and technological systems has begun to threaten the ecological systems on which they rely. The root concept of sustainability refers
to the ability of an activity to endure without undermining the conditions on which it depends. A related series of ecological and social problems—like biodiversity loss, demographic instability, toxic pollution, and climate change—indicate that the human endeavor may be undermining the conditions of its own endurance. Even a modest prudence suggests that we ask why, and what must be done to change things.

Sustainability presents an odd sort of challenge for global society, at once minimal and comprehensive. It asks us to consider the prospects for a merely decent survival of the human species, but by doing so it raises issues about the value of nonhuman life forms, the goals of economies, the form of humanity’s presence on Earth, and the kind of futures we want to make possible. As we begin to consider what we should sustain, we are eventually forced to reflect on what sustains us. On what do human cultures and economies depend? How do human and ecological systems relate? What are the conditions for the human spirit?

There is a paradoxical depth to these questions. Although they inquire about the moral minimum of a decent survival, answering them invites reflection on the totality of our dependency and relations. As sustainability confronts political societies with decisions about how to protect what sustains us, it pushes sweeping moral questions into public visibility. Ethical frameworks and religious traditions can help foster civic debate about problems that call into question the trajectory of our economic, political, and technological systems.

Invoking morality and exploring religious traditions may in fact empower responses to overwhelming challenges. Faced with difficult choices about reform, societies may be tempted to embrace the easier supposition that history affords us no alternative—that markets are shaped by ungovernable forces, governments by inexorable tendencies of power, and cultures by inevitable technological progress. Globalization is sometimes presented this way. Perhaps the chief contribution we can make to “global ethics” is to refuse such suppositions, to insist that we can create some global institutions of governance based on shared values and commitments.

Presenting sustainability as a moral problem accomplishes something similar. It affirms the possibility that, through dialogue and deliberation, we can find alternatives to our present systems and that, doing so, we can resist reductionist interpretations of complex threats to our humanity. Treating sustainability as a moral problem lets us consider the possibility that our economic, political, and technological systems might work differently and better, encouraging us to imagine how we can inclusively integrate several kinds of sustaining goods. What cultural commitments would it take to harmonize economic health, ecological integrity, social equity, and fairness to the future?

The Spirit of Sustainability provides resources for engaging those questions, understanding their context, and beginning to formulate workable answers. By introducing the question of sustainability in multiple moral perspectives, the volume also helps keep the concept of sustainability pragmatic: presenting the basic challenge sustainability poses to many cultures, traditions, and systems produces a common arena of discussion across many social worlds. This volume helps develop sustainability as a bridging or integrative rubric capable of describing shared moral jeopardy, of organizing social problems, and of gathering cultural resources for response. (For further discussion see Willis Jenkins’s “Sustainability Theory” herein.)

Spirit: Exploring Religion, Culture, and Ecology

Any resource with encyclopedic ambitions will inevitably omit relevant topics; for just this one volume in a wider series on sustainability, we have had to select from an extensive range of possible articles. Our intention, however, was not to provide exhaustive coverage but to offer representative and introductory resources that will point readers to further connections and invite deeper examination of related topics. Many articles provide perspective for exploring other volumes of the Berkshire Encyclopedia of Sustainability. Most also suggest additional sources for study or contemplation.

The 147 articles here cover significant ground in philosophical, social, and environmental ethics, with emphasis on approaches to cultural critique and social change. Among these entries we have created (for several reasons) a special focus on religious traditions, practices, and concepts. First, interpreting our contemporary cultural context and its political possibilities requires an understanding of religious discourse; some of the obstacles to social change may have roots in religious values, while some of the paths to reform may involve spiritual dimensions. Second, for many people a full answer about sustenance must involve some reach toward depths typically
described as religious—toward beauty, mystery, spirit, love, faith, or God.

Third, and most importantly, considering sustainability as a moral problem raises both basic and overarching questions; religious traditions have developed moral frameworks for thinking them through. A familiarity with religious, spiritual, and cultural traditions can help us engage the complexity and depth of sustainability challenges. This volume collects many of the most important resources for readers to consult as they begin exploring sustainability as a moral issue.

The burgeoning work in the field of Religion and Ecology, in which scholars have been exploring, evaluating, and revising the relationships of religion, culture, and environments, has provided an important arena for discussions of the spirit of sustainability. Indeed this volume was produced in collaboration with the Forum on Religion and Ecology (FORE), and its contributors include many participants from FORE events and publications. See, for example, Mary Evelyn Tucker’s “Global Religious Traditions,” and Frederick Mathewson Denny’s “Islam,” which expands his initial scope in a FORE publication to include issues of water management from the legal, economic, and ethical perspectives of the Islamic world. In addition, many of the quotations found throughout the volume have been made available by FORE.

This volume also moves beyond the usual discussions of religion and ecological change by considering the broader range of moral issues that must be raised in sustainability debates. Confronting sustainability requires not only ecological thinking but practical deliberations over such issues as the economic common good amidst global poverty, a stable international peace in the face of nuclear weapons, public health despite new anthropogenic risks, and social justice in fairness to future generations. Many contributors focus primarily on ecological dimensions of religious and ethical frameworks, likely because environmental commitments are the most underdeveloped topics or the arena in which the most significant change has been happening. But sustainability includes dimensions of exploration still more encompassing and interdisciplinary.

Not only must we investigate how religious and spiritual traditions think about their environments, or how nature provokes spirituality, but how we can meet the integrative, comprehensive challenges of sustainability with the civic and moral resources available to us.

There is no single definition of religion at work here, neither of culture, spirituality, or ethics. The variety of contributors and the diversity of topics encompass many notions of religion and culture. Several contributors on indigenous traditions make a point of not distinguishing between religion and culture, indicating that some Western categories of distinction may need rethinking. The normative orientation of this volume—relating cultural topics to sustainability as a moral problem—assumes broadly inclusive views of the relevant topics.

Finally, a word must be said about “spirit.” The title of this volume employs a term now used within many notions of the religious, and yet also in order to escape from religious categories or institutions. In other contexts “spirit” may refer to the intelligence of humanity, the living force of animals, the vitality of life, the power of history, the breath of divinity, or the wisdom of the cosmos. Wildly variant, all those meanings converge in asserting that the global challenge of sustainability cannot be reduced to political calculation or market exercise. Facing sustainability as a moral problem requires a spirit of sustainability; it requires summoning our intelligence, acting with purpose, companioning with life and learning anew the economy of wisdom.

Absorptive and inclusive, “spirit” seems an apt metaphor to indicate the multi-disciplinary, pluralist, and many-cultured lexicon of moral resources the reader will find here. It also suggests liveliness, and the reader will find that—unlike staid reference works summarizing objective knowledge—many contributors explain their topics animated by a sense of common purpose. Pluralist and purposeful, multivalent and animated, spirit is a sustaining metaphor.

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A Note on Writing about the Divine with Gendered Language

Referring to God is always a perilous linguistic activity—some monotheistic traditions in fact make that peril a key point. In a volume covering many vocabularies of the divine, mundane functions of language—like pronouns—can carry unwanted ideological baggage. They can make it seem like God is a man, one English-speaking man no less, which can raise objections for all sorts of reasons. In interfaith context, our language can lead us not only into gender trouble but number trouble.

Some scholars still use masculine pronouns as the default neutral, but for many readers that can make it seem as if the writing is emphasizing a masculine image of God. Other scholars might alternate between masculine pronouns in one paragraph and feminine ones in the next. Some even experiment with “hir” and “ze” as hybrids of his/her and she/he. In our view such contrivances start to trip up the reader, but they do show that talk about the divine stresses language, especially when cultural systems are under criticism for their complicity in sexism. Acknowledging what can be called a sexist patrimony of language, many scholars use feminine pronouns as the default, in order to interrupt the dominant gendered images they produce. We may not have any gender-appropriate language for God.

So in this volume we have encouraged authors to avoid using pronouns altogether. The effect can be clunky, for example, in a sentence like “God’s got the whole world in God’s hands,” but one can take theological consolation in that it should be a little awkward to try to talk about the divine.

Beyond that encouragement, however, we have let the authors’ prose stand as it appears, assuming that they are representing their tradition or subject with their language use. The divine in a tradition may be plural, immanent, transcendent, nonpersonal, specifically male, specifically female, androgynous, or any combination of those. Authors use the names and pronouns they think most appropriate to their topic or tradition.

Willis Jenkins