

THEME 01

# Has sustainability become a secular religion?

SUSTAINABILITY

MEANINGFUL  
CONSUMPTION

SOCIO-CULTURAL  
TRENDS

Since the 1970s, the concept of sustainability has been gaining traction with an ever-wider group of people. Today, in the West, sustainability is deeply ingrained in public discourse and impacts decision-making in politics, business and our everyday lives. Even more so, we may speculate that sustainability provides purpose to our modern, often godless, lives. As such, we can actually understand sustainability as a new secular religion that not only benefits the environment, but also the fabric of our societies.

## Our observations

- The term sustainability picked up momentum from the [mid-1970s](#) onwards and was further propelled by the publication of the Brundtland Report ("[Our Common Future](#)") in 1987. It defined sustainability as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."
- In 2015, [Nielsen](#) found that 66% of respondents worldwide claim they are willing to pay a premium for products and services from "sustainable" companies. In 2013, this was 50%. In practice, actual sales data shows that developed markets are well ahead of developing ones in terms of the market share of sustainable products. As we have [noted](#) before, younger generations (Millennials and Gen Z) are more willing to pay this premium than generations before them.
- [McKinsey's](#) sustainability survey suggests that businesses increasingly take sustainability into account, in order to align with their intrinsic goals and core values, to satisfy consumer demand, attract and retain talent and to satisfy investors. Regulatory compliance, (energy) efficiency and reputation are not as important anymore.
- Sustainability investment is clearly on the rise and in 2016 it already amounted to some [\\$23 trillion](#) (i.e. 25% more than in 2014), which corresponds to 26% of all professionally managed assets. Growth has been fastest in Japan, while Europe, the U.S. and Canada remain global leaders.
- According to the [World Values Survey](#), most Western countries can be characterized by secular-rational values and a high valuation of self-expression (as opposed to a focus on survival). This corresponds, according to the survey, to a prioritization of environmental protection.



## Connecting the dots

In most Western countries, sustainability, or in a narrower sense: environmentalism, is no longer confined to a small subset of believers. Instead, it has become part of the mainstream discourse in everyday life, politics and business and, even though not all individuals, governments and companies act accordingly, all somehow, somehow take sustainability into account. That is, sustainability has become the norm and those who clearly don't act sustainably now have to explain their motives. Even more so, sustainability has, for many, become more than just a moral hype or fashion statement. People are increasingly looking for a profound sense of [meaning](#) or purpose in their work or in their role as consumer and sustainability provides that sense of purpose. In the past, and for many others still, religion fulfilled that role as it meant that our own lives were defined by something much bigger and much more important. Today, the wellbeing of planet earth is that much bigger as we are increasingly realizing that our collective actions have a profound (negative) impact on global ecological (and social) systems. As such, one could argue that the notion of sustainability fills the spiritual gap left by the demise of traditional religion (and [socialism](#) as the former dominant secular religion). Indeed, many, and often critically, have argued that the notion of sustainability shows many similarities with (Christian) faith. As writer Michael Crichton noted: "There's an initial Eden, a paradise, a state of grace and unity with nature, there's a fall from grace into a state of pollution as a result of eating from the tree of knowledge, and as a result of our actions there is a judgment day coming for us all. We are all energy sinners, doomed to die, unless we seek salvation, which is now called sustainability." Crichton further argued that this particular take on

sustainability (as irrational, rigid and politicized) carries the risk of not being taken seriously. Indeed, many non-believers have used explicit religious metaphors (e.g. the Green Church) to denounce sustainable politics as irrational ideas that lead to enormous societal costs without (sufficient) scientific proof.

We may, however, also embrace and reinforce this perspective on sustainability. Perhaps this kind of quasi-religious belief is necessary to achieve behavioral change on the scale that is needed. Especially the problem of climate change, despite compelling scientific evidence, is way beyond our immediate observation, hence an abstract idea (i.e. distant in both time and space). Because of this, many (implicitly) abide by the cautionary principle (i.e. better safe than sorry) and live sustainable lifestyles even though they don't fully understand the evidence and uncertainties themselves. In fact, this is not so different from traditional believers who follow biblical guidelines to avoid an unpleasant afterlife. It remains questionable whether the masses who, upon asking, claim to care about sustainability, actually act accordingly (especially since no god is keeping track of our deeds). So even if sustainability is indeed the new secular religion, it remains to be seen whether it will actually alter the course of history. However, even when no substantial environmental gains are made, from a societal perspective the spiritual dimension of sustainability may be a blessing nonetheless. By giving masses of (young, urban, Western) people a sense of purpose and a set of rules that go beyond their individual needs and wants, sustainability provides a shared narrative for an otherwise hyper individualized society.

## Implications

- It's difficult for us to shake off our consumerist's feathers and the sustainability paradigm is easily coupled with modern consumerism through a focus on sustainable or fair products. Even more so, paradoxically, one of the most ubiquitous ways to express one's embrace of sustainability is to *consume* sustainable goods and services. Only the more radical believers drastically cut down their levels of consumption, much like religious abstinence (e.g. [minimalism](#) challenges).
- The spiritual dimension of sustainability or environmentalism makes it harder to implement imperfect solutions that could help to mitigate climate change. Both carbon capture and storage (CCS) and next-gen nuclear fission could provide scalable solutions, but they are countered with both rational arguments as well as spiritual ones (i.e. they provide "easy" solutions for which little sacrifice is needed).
- Carbon [offset](#) programs are a bit like Catholic indulgences that relieved us from our sins. Because of this negative dimension (i.e. an admission of guilt) few consumers are willing to pay for those (e.g. when [flying](#)), while they are willing to pay for goods and services that are intrinsically more sustainable.