

Beyond Win-Win: A Syncretic Theory on Corporate Stakeholder Engagement in Sustainable Development

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of syncretism to articulate the construct of a novel theoretical approach that may help to accelerate progress in developing substantively more sustainable business activities. One reason why the integration of environmental and social responsibility in business has been so difficult to achieve in practice is that it is not just a battle of competing business logics, but a battle of faiths. The concept of syncretism, with its roots in religious synthesis, may be far more relevant and useful than conventional approaches to combining the two which rarely seem to rise above a “win-win” appeal to logic. The connectionist logic of syncretism may show us a way beyond paradigmatic conformity in business sustainability research so that scholars with diverse theoretical backgrounds might have a common ground for discussion, find constructive connections, and engage in potentially more insightful and creative interactions to develop our understanding of corporate sustainability.

Keywords

Business sustainability, paradigmatic change, win-win, syncretism.

Introduction: The Corporate Sustainability Challenge

At the heart of the corporate sustainability (CS) agenda is the challenge of integrating and balancing the pursuit of economic prosperity with both social welfare and justice, and the maintenance of environmental quality. This challenge is frequently framed in terms of the technical and managerial issues involved in creating more ecologically efficient (and less socially exploitative) production and consumption systems that meet the needs of consumers more sustainably. At a more fundamental level however, CS represents a challenge to how management practitioners and theorists think about business, society and the natural environment, and the inter-relationship between them. How we view this interrelationship is important because, as Marcus, Kurucz and Colbert (2010) argue, our conception of it will determine the research questions asked, the theories that are developed, and the prescriptions offered to both practitioners and policy makers to help them establish more sustainable business enterprises. However, as Joseph, Orlitzky, Gurd, Borland, and Lindgreen (2018) and [ENREF 83](#)Valente (2012) observe, theorising efforts have not yet been successful in providing organisations with effective prescriptions on how to generate and maintain sustainable societal and economic development. Management research has yet to rise to the challenge of finding innovative ways to understand the potential barriers, bridges and pitfalls involved in integrating sustainability into business operations and what corporate policies, processes and practices are needed for a fundamental transition to sustainability (Garriga & Melé, 2004; Starik & Kanashiro, 2013). The practical upshot of this lack of progress is that:

“Despite the growing consensus among scholars and managers on the need for paradigmatic change, there is little sign within the academic, practitioner, and public policy domains that such a shift is taking hold [...] A continual stream of evidence

reveals devastating business practices that catastrophically undermine social and ecological integrity” (Valente, 2010, p. 440).

In an influential Academy of Management Review paper, Gladwin, Kennelly, and Krause (1995) argue that conventional “modern” management theory is constricted by a dominant social paradigm underpinned by a fractured epistemology which separates humanity from nature and truth from morality. In calling for a transformation of management theory and practice that contributes to sustainable development, they outline for management theorists a two-fold reintegration challenge between objective (truth) and subjective (morality) and between human instrumentality and nature-centred altruistic ethics.

Gladwin et al. (1995) frame the challenge of the pursuit of CS in terms of three environmental paradigms: technocentrism, ecocentrism and sustaincentrism. The first two represent the conventional poles of the existing debate. The technocentric paradigm contends that humans are entitled to explore and exploit natural resources for economic gain. In this paradigm the objectified natural world has only instrumental and (typically monetarily) quantifiable value as a commodity, and supports the thesis of corporate managers as “ruthlessly hard-driving, strictly top-down, command-and-control focused, shareholder-value-obsessed, win-at-any-cost business leaders” (Ghoshal, 2005, p. 85). The ecocentric paradigm represents the antithesis of this, by granting nonhuman nature an intrinsic value, independent of human values and consciousness. This places limits on the extent of human prerogatives to use and alter nature, and would recast corporate managers in roles as altruistic environmental activists and advocates.

The polarised nature of these two paradigms, and the lack of compatibility and common-ground between them, is viewed as an important factor in explaining the lack of progress towards more sustainable management theory and practice. As an

alternative, Gladwin et al. (1995) propose a “third way”, a new sustaincentric paradigm. This recognises the intrinsic linkages between human activities and natural systems and rejects the moral monism of both instrumental (technocentrism) and altruistic (ecocentrism) paradigms in favour of moral pluralism. Despite its potential, the sustaincentric paradigm is mainly descriptive and still requires further theoretical grounding and empirical analysis. It falls short of bridging the gap between the normative and operational by conceptualising the mechanisms of integration of sustainability concerns into business operations. Therefore it has been largely left aside by sustainability research and criticised as an idealist construct inapplicable in the real world and lacking empirical evidence demonstrating its existence in practice, or as an ambiguously defined concept risking the co-option of ethics by business concerns (Banerjee, 2002; Valente, 2012). As a consequence, despite the substantial body of knowledge accumulated by the CS literature, the challenge of reintegration identified by Gladwin, Kennelly & Krause is far from being resolved (Starik & Kanashiro, 2013; Valente, 2012).

The abiding question that hangs over the business and sustainability debate is how to achieve a paradigmatic shift and progress towards “synthesis” and the pursuit of a sustaincentric approach to management thought and practice. As Valente (2010) notes, there is no shortage of scholarship arguing in favour of a paradigmatic shift, but there is a lack of clarity concerning the barriers to such a shift taking place and how they might be overcome. A number of scholars before and after Valente (2010, 2012) have endeavoured to reconnect business and society using various interpretative lenses (for examples, see Table 1). In spite of the growing volume of research on organisations and the environment, and the progress that has been made in identifying the broad capabilities and resources that affect a firm’s ability to simultaneously pursue financial,

social and environmental success (Berchicci & King, 2007; Etzion, 2007; Hart & Dowell, 2011), economic growth continues to be privileged. Now, however, it is recast as sustainable growth, with conventional notions of capital, income and growth continuing to inform the sustainability paradigm (Banerjee & Bonnefous, 2011; Newton, 2002; Valente, 2012).

Insert Table 1 about here

In their review of CS research, Van der Byl & Slawinski (2015) highlight both the lack of research exploring *how* firms can address the tensions inherent within the CS concept in order to make progress, and the need for novel approaches to understanding and managing those tensions. This article builds upon the work of Martinez (2012, 2013) by refining the theoretical construct of syncretism to position it as a potential resource for scholars and practitioners to understand and pursue a paradigmatic shift toward sustaincentrism. The syncretic theory discussed here integrates insights from multiple disciplines (Whiteman, Walker, & Perego, 2013), with foundational ideas drawn from cultural, religious (the “source domains” of syncretism) and CS literature. In other words, we “blend” the theory of syncretism by comparing contrasting domains (i.e. culture, religion and business sustainability) on the basis of their similarities. This approach to organisational theory-building is known as analogical reasoning (Oswick, Fleming, and Hanlon (2011). Referring to the criteria proposed by Corley and Gioia (2011) to evaluate an “interesting” theory, the theoretical framework developed in this paper may be deemed interesting because it questions assumptions underlying the prevailing theory of CS and transgresses paradigm-induced expectations. As such, we find a logical alignment of the syncretic theory with the

cultural beliefs of the time and of the scholarly audience for the theory (DiMaggio, 1995). What is more, because the syncretic theory crosses fields/disciplines, it arguably qualifies as a multi-level theory that has the potential to reconnect the objective/instrumental and subjective/ethical camps within the organisational sciences (Klein, Tosi, & Cannella, 1999).

What is syncretism?

Syncretism originates from the earlier Greek term *symkrasis*: “a mixing together, compound” (Stewart & Shaw, 1994, p. 3). It is traditionally defined as the production of modified and/or new religions-cultures emerging from a contact between, and interpenetration of, different belief/value systems¹ (Droogers & Greenfield, 2001). Syncretism is a very ancient and multilayered concept, with varied meanings and uses in the literature, and the terminology used to describe syncretic patterns is not homogeneous (Stewart, 1999). This led anthropologists Stewart (1999) and Droogers (1989) to reflect on “the problem of the definition of syncretism”. They identify four main uses of the term: syncretism as a process, syncretism as a state or condition, syncretism as a theory and syncretism as an ideal. Research adopting the first two perspectives, tend to use the term descriptively, while syncretism as an ideal model generally uses the term in a strictly normative fashion. Research using syncretism as a theory can use both descriptive and normative approaches (see for example: Berk & Galvan, 2009).

In anthropology and religion, the term syncretism is used to describe a process of change, a mixing of values and forms that happens – to different extents – when there

¹ The notion of ‘value system’ is used throughout the paper to refer to a set of consistent personal and cultural values held within (and applied to) a community/group/society. For example, Gladwin et al. (1995) propose a set of values which support sustainable development: inclusiveness, connectivity, equity, prudence and security. For further discussion of value systems in companies, see Wenstøp and Myrmel (2006).

is contact between different value systems. Syncretism is also used to define a state of reconciliation, integration or coexistence of conflicting values and meanings that happens as a consequence of a mixing process. Such a state of syncretism can take different forms and degrees according to the cultural and historic context. The emphasis in the literature is on the religious, political and cultural role of syncretic processes, but they have also long been important to facilitate business transactions and everyday life. For example, documents some 2,500 years old reveal that Jewish mercenary communities living in ancient Egypt appeared to be willing to compromise their faith to conduct business through legal oaths sworn to local goddesses like Satet (Wilkinson, 2014).

The literature also highlights that syncretic change is not always inevitable (Laibelman, 2004; Stewart, 1999). If it fails to be achieved, then either one of the value systems is likely to be obliterated, or both may drift apart leading to conflict and instability (Droogers, 1989). The theory of syncretism has been developed in cultural studies and sociology to explain why, how and to what extent syncretic patterns emerge and what influences the form and extent of the resulting reconciliation of value systems through the identification of commonalities (Stewart, 1999).

In relation to management scholarship and sustainability, Martinez (2012) and Berger, Cunningham, and Dumright (2007, pp. 143-144) refer to syncretism to evoke a “*combination of noneconomic and economic objectives*” in the mainstreaming of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and its embedding in the day-to-day culture, processes and activities of a firm. They define it as a management philosophy, an overarching approach to business that mirrors a corporate effort to appreciate and respond to the often conflicting views and values of a diverse set of stakeholders (Berger et al., 2007). The concept of syncretism is however used by Berger et al. (2007)

as one element in a multi-form framework for CSR mainstreaming, not as the central theme of analysis, and by Martinez (2012) as a way to describe the challenge of combining pragmatic and constructionist discourses in business, not as an integrative theory of CS.

In the spirit of contributing to the development of the construct of a novel theoretical approach that promotes the integration of sustainability in business, this article adopts the aspirational ideal model meaning of syncretism. Firstly we examine the aspects of the relationship between business and sustainability that justify a syncretic perspective on CS.

Reconciling Business & Sustainability: Can “Win-Win” Win Out?

The prevailing narrative in discussing the relationship between business and socio-environmental issues in the context of making progress towards sustainability has been the “win-win” business case (Hahn, Figge, Pinkse, & Preuss, 2010; Van der Byl & Slawinski 2015). It is commonly discussed through Elkington’s (1997) notion of a “triple bottom line” defined as “focusing on economic prosperity, environmental quality and . . . social justice” (p. 2). This embodies a logic that the (whole-hearted rather than instrumental) embracing of pro-sustainability measures within corporate strategies can pay economic, environmental and social dividends simultaneously. Central to this argument are beliefs that customers will discriminate in favour of more sustainable companies and products (including paying a modest premium for more sustainable products), and that eco-efficiency strategies will remove costs related to waste, inefficient resource use and socio-environmental risks. The win-win argument was given early empirical weight by Porter and van der Linde’s (1995) study of chemical companies showing the positive contribution to profits, innovation and

competitiveness that investments in sustainability-oriented strategies generate. The appeal of this argument to business practitioners and policy makers was obvious in that it required no compromise on the part of consumers or investors, and it operated via market forces rather than through regulation. The win-win argument also recast the sustainability challenge to business theory and practice entirely within the existing and dominant technocentric paradigm, by framing pro-sustainability strategies as one particular route towards increased efficiency, competitiveness and profit.

Although seductively appealing to business stakeholders and widely promoted by consultancies, environmental organisations, policy-makers and businesses (Salzmann, Ionescu-Somers, & Steger, 2005), the win-win argument has several substantial flaws. Firstly, it frames the interrelationship between business, society and the natural environment in terms of certain issues “overlapping” in ways that can be synergistic and beneficial in relation to each agenda. This places it within the view of that relationship as one of “intersecting” areas of common interest, rather than the “embedded” relationship which Marcus, Kurucz and Colbert (2010) argue frames the relationship more realistically as business existing as a construct within society, that itself is embedded within, and dependent upon, nature.

Secondly, the notion of a “win” also suggests a final resolution and an end point in some particular endeavour, but in the case of the relationship between businesses, society and the environment it is in reality an open-ended and constant process of strategic adjustment and negotiation.

Thirdly the appeal of the win-win argument, that there is no conflict between pro-sustainability strategies and conventional notions of competitiveness and profitability, and therefore no tensions involved and no need for compromise between those agendas, is potentially overly simplistic and optimistic (Hahn, Figge, Pinkse, &

Preuss, 2010; Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2015). Shelton's (1994) study of companies who were amongst the early leaders in sustainability based competitiveness noted that they often struggled to retain the momentum of their sustainability strategies once the "low-hanging fruit" of energy efficiencies and waste elimination had been picked. The allure of win-win benefits gave such sustainability strategies early momentum, but this was often lost once further progress required more substantial levels of investment or organisational change.

Finally, a key flaw in the win-win argument is that it relegates sustainability into a particular set of strategic challenges and opportunities for companies that may prove a source of differentiation and competitive advantage, rather than recognising it as a more fundamental challenge to the dominant management paradigm and as an alternative approach to management thought and practice.

From both a theoretical and a practical perspective, the business case for sustainability, and the win-win logic that underpins it, is problematic. The theoretical frameworks for the business case cope poorly with the complexity that firms confront in reality, and the empirical evidence that has been gathered to support it either consists of individual qualitative studies that are unrepresentative, or quantitative studies whose results are contradictory and/or inconclusive (Salzmann et al., 2005).

An Alternative Reintegration Approach: Syncretism

If over-reliance on win-win solutions is partly responsible for the lack of progress in developing substantively more sustainable production/consumption systems, then it suggests a need to explore other approaches to understanding the business and sustainability relationship. Scholarly contributions to the field of CS have included consideration of negotiated agreements (e.g., Bailey & Rupp, 2006; Bressers & de

Bruijn, 2005), trade-offs (Hahn et al., 2010) and ambidexterity (Hahn, Pinkse, Preuss, & Figge, 2016). Such contributions have however tended to restrict their search for solutions to concepts already commonly applied to understanding organisations and their strategies, and without doing much to explicitly address the limitations of the win-win paradigm and how to move beyond it.

Religion is one area that researchers have looked into as a source of value systems, moral points-of-view, virtues and codes of conduct that can offer alternatives to a conventional management wisdom generally imbued with materialism and individualism (see for example: Dyck & Schroeder, 2005; Lamberton, 2005). As a case in point, the sustaincentric paradigm is presented by Gladwin et al. as inspired partly “from claims of the universalism of life and stewardship admonitions common to the major religions” (1995, p. 890). Syncretism may represent an interesting avenue for theorists and researchers to explore since it explains how religious systems of belief have influenced, evolved and interacted with other value systems. The roots of syncretism are in cultural and religious studies, particularly in explaining the emergence of new/modified religions or cultures around the world (e.g., Maroney, 2006; Martin, 2006). For example, the entry of proselytising Christianity into Africa (and other parts of the world) introduced new views of the universe, ritual behaviours and social practices (Droogers & Greenfield, 2001). The emergence of the Feast of Christmas may also be explained as a form of syncretism, one between pagan ideas and Christianity² (Schineller, 1992). Other examples include the Nigerian religion Chrislam which combines Christian and Islamic doctrines; and Universal Sufism that seeks the unity of all people and religions.

² Although the Feast of Christmas as the adaptation of a Pagan festival has prevailed, some Christians (especially in Nigeria) still see it as an ill-advised accommodation to Pagan ideas (Schineller, 1992).

The concept of syncretism, and the “cultural mergings” it seeks to explain, has the potential to be applied to other contexts including business. Berger et al.’s (2007) notion of “syncretic stewardship” as a means of integrating environmental consciousness with a business’s economic purpose to create a reintegrated business culture with a more holistic view of business sustainability is one example. Another comes from Handelman (2006) who applied it to consumers whose behaviours are influenced by multiple, and often contradictory, group memberships and values. Handelman constructs a view of consumers as syncretic societal constituents combining economic roles and identities as consumers, workers or managers with others as activists, members of non-profit organisations, minorities, and kinship groups, and who are therefore not driven solely by the rational pursuit of economic self-interest. Instead, they struggle to balance and maintain conflicting philosophical and religious beliefs, values, and practices which ultimately determine their approach to consumption.

Some commentators argue that syncretism has a complex history (e.g., Hartney, 2001; Shaw & Stewart, 1994), being conceived of either as a politically dangerous and theologically disputed word with pejorative connotations (Baird, 1991; 1984; Hesselgrave & Rommen, 1989; Hiebert, 2006) or as an analytically and anthropologically instructive concept with non-pejorative connotations (Droogers, 1989, 2001; Shaw & Stewart, 1994). In the religious context, syncretism is often regarded critically as a process causing impurity in what is claimed to be an otherwise pure form of doctrine based on an impeccable revelation (Shaw & Stewart, 1994). It is often taken to imply the “inauthentic” or “contamination”, and the infiltration into a supposedly “pure” tradition of symbols and meanings seen as belonging to other, incompatible traditions (Shaw & Stewart, 1994, p. 1). For such critics, the priority is to preserve the validity of a circle of faith, or of a “traditional” way of thinking. Such a

reaction to attempts to merge conventional business and sustainability agendas has been observed within the field of FairTrade. Here efforts to further commercialise the concept to increase its market share (and thereby its sustainability benefits) have been opposed by those fearing it will dilute the FairTrade ideology and represent a selling of the movement's soul (Moore, 2004). A disintegrative form of syncretism between the commercialisation of the FairTrade concept and the maintenance of FairTrade principles is thus observed. In this (pejorative/pessimistic) sense, syncretism evokes a negative process of homogenisation that erases diversity and dilutes identity.

Writers who use the word syncretism more positively see it as an adaptation/coping mechanism that is inevitable, desirable and necessary when belief systems are in conflict and the persistence of conflict would harm society as a whole (Sanneh, 1989). Some praise the relevance of syncretism as a framework for understanding the creation and development of new belief systems (Droogers & Greenfield, 2001; Hartney, 2001) and analysing “what has or has not been borrowed or blended, and what has or has not influenced specific religious thinkers at specific points in history” (Berling, 1980, p. 8). The non-pejorative, and often positive, significance of syncretism is particularly endorsed by postmodern anthropologists (Shaw & Stewart, 1994). They emphasise the influence of human factors in explaining the incoherencies in faith; the main premise being that people have different needs at particular periods and that syncretism responds to these needs (Hartney, 2001). Shaw and Stuart (1994, p. 20) write:

“Syncretism may be (or perhaps only looks like) a form of resistance, because hegemonic practices are never simply absorbed wholesale through passive ‘acculturation’; at the very least, their incorporation involves some kind of

transformation, some kind of deconstruction and reconstruction which converts to people's own meanings and projects.”

In this (non-pejorative) sense therefore, syncretism reflects a positive process of transformation or progress towards unity, one in which the dominant order is modified to reconcile with individual needs. In this paper, we contend that a syncretic transition in the practice of management, because it reflects an attempt at a synthesis from divergent theoretical positions (or competing faiths), is needed to foster the developments and adaptations that companies will have to make to pursue a paradigmatic shift towards sustaincentrism.

Exploring the Theory and Construct of Syncretism

The concept of syncretism has been used within many different institutional spheres of cultures in contact (Baron, 1977) to provide theoretical foundations for models of various forms of societal change. Although syncretism studies have tended to focus on the fusion of religious forms and beliefs (Wagner, 1975), syncretism as a theoretical framework re-emerged in social theory during the 1990s within studies exploring the dynamics of institutional and cultural transformation during processes of globalization, transnational nationalism and diaspora communities (Stewart, 1999).

Syncretic theory rests upon the idea that all collective social constructions (such as belief systems, religions, culture and institutions) are porous and “composed of an indeterminate number of features which are decomposable and combinable in unpredictable ways” (Berk & Galvan, 2009, p. 545). Consequently they are open to intermixture, and the borrowing of concepts and symbols whilst interpenetrating, hybridizing or blending with each other (Stewart, 1999). The varied terminologies used in the literature to describe a combination of socially constructed features (e.g. fusion,

interpenetration, hybridizing, blending) may be taken to infer the existence of different levels/forms of syncretism³, notwithstanding the potential of this variety to create a sense of confusion. One way of clarifying these levels/forms (and the differences between them) is to explore the theory and construct of syncretism, beyond discussions of terminological nuances.

Syncretic theory argues that the degree of combinability of features within collective social constructions depends on two elements: (i) the wider socio-political context and (ii) micro-level individual creativity and skills. On the one hand, historico-political events and circumstances may create critical junctures in which actors enjoy greater autonomy to deviate from path dependencies and select between alternative paths or create syncretic value systems (Stewart, 1999). Mounting evidence of potentially disruptive climate change may, for example, be on the verge of creating such a critical juncture for businesses and their strategy making processes (Winn, Kirchgeorg, Griffiths, Linnenluecke, & Günther, 2011). On the other hand, the extent and form of syncretism is also determined by the ability of individuals to identify vital common themes and correspondences between alternative paths, assess what elements among divergent idea systems are intrinsically incompatible and creatively find avenues through which the activities resulting from divergent idea systems can be made to cohere with each other (Laibelman, 2004; Shaw & Stewart, 1994). Therefore, syncretic theory proposes that individual action in institutional contexts where divergent idea systems co-exist is “always potentially creative insofar as actors draw

³ As a case in point, the studies of Stewart (1999) and Hiebert (2006) boil down to three levels/forms of syncretism: interpenetration, blending and hybridism. (i) Interpenetration occurs when idea systems penetrate each other, mutually, borrowing compatible ideas and forms, but each system retains its distinctive meaning with minor adaptations. (ii) In blending, one of the idea systems morphs into the other or is appropriated by the other. Here there is clearly a dominant system that retains its meaning and a dominated system that loses distinctive meaning. The dominant system can become substantially altered or corrupted by blending. (iii) Hybridisation is a type of blending when two systems merge into something that is new and recombines elements of the original system with a different innovative meaning.

on a wide variety of cultural and institutional resources to create novel combinations⁴" (Berk & Galvan, 2009). Accordingly, the theory has focused on "determining the fit between the manifest content of idea systems and the ideological factors promoting or hindering the blending of trait complexes" (Wagner, 1975, p. 164).

The theory has also identified a variety of patterns through which syncretism is achieved. When there is a fit between the contents of two colliding idea systems, and at least one of them has the ability to adapt and adopt new concepts, the blending of traits takes the form of transposition – i.e. "the translation of the arriving ideology to align it to the indigenous one in a meaningful and reinforcing way" (Neylan, 2003, p. 113). For example, the similarities between the symbolism used in the cult of the Virgin Mary and the one used in the cult of the pre-conquest Goddess Toniantzin in Yucatan (Mexico) facilitated the acceptance of Christianity by permitting the dogma and ritual of Christianity to be interpreted within an indigenous worldview of Toniantzin worshipers. In turn, the imagery of the Toniantzin Goddess was blended into the practices of the cult of the Virgin Mary by parts of the indigenous population resulting in iconic symbols in which the Virgin Mary is represented with the indigenous features and distinctive attributes of Toniantzin and in prayers to Virgin Mary whose contents is intertwined with those from the Cult of the Goddess (Wagner, 1975).

Neylan (2003) who used syncretic theory to study the emergence of "blending" patterns within the Tsimshian communities in Western Canada during the nineteenth century provides another example. The Tsimshians actively reshaped European Christianity into modes that allowed the integration of Christian missionaries' social structure with pre-existing Tsimshian social structure. This deeper form of transposition

⁴ An example of such 'conscious syncretism' can be found in the incorporation of Muslim practices by young, enterprising Giriama farmers in Coastal Kenya where claims to mix Muslim and traditional practices are made because of the locally perceived affliction by "Quranic" spirits.

was achieved by appropriation and falsification (i.e. instillation of new meanings) of Christian concepts. The Tsimshians adapted these concepts into their own spiritual traditions and power structures⁵. In doing so, they acted to trigger various forms of syncretism, including the interpretation and treatment of missionaries as chiefs and shamanic figures, the alignment of clan identity with denomination loyalty, and the incorporation of church processions and choirs into traditional winter festivals (re-named after Christian festivities).

The Tsimshians also used “masking” as a form of syncretism through which symbols and modes of representation are borrowed from the imposed religion whilst the essence of old practices endures. Ostensibly the Tsimshians built houses and churches with European facades, but with interiors laid out according to Tsimshian custom. More subtly, in a mix of masking and integration, chiefly and shamanic figures moved into the roles of priests, evangelists, church administrators and nurses “where they not infrequently startled the Euro-Canadians with the authority of their action and discourse” (Neylan, 2003, p. 205).

As a result, Tsimshian communities, despite professing Christian faith, developed a syncretic synthesis of spiritual beliefs and practices – some shamanic and some Christian – that become highly individualised within each member of the community. According to Neylan (2003), the syncretic synthesis sustained most of the traditional native social and cultural practices under Christianity (including some indigenous spiritual expressions) yet in altered or adapted forms. This synthesis being facilitated by the relative geographical isolation and distance of the Tsimshians from the centres of missionary power (Neylan, 2003).

⁵ Another interesting example is the Navajo Native Christian Church, which followed Christian Mass ritual but included traditional peyote ingestion as part of the ritual.

Theory and historical cases such as those discussed above allow us to distil the construct through which syncretism is achieved: a combination of the (subjective) freedom of agency and (objective) structural constraints (Droogers, 2001). Such a construct is arguably made clearer when a contrast is made between what Meyer (1992) terms syncretism “from below” and syncretism “from above”.

Syncretism from below relates to subjective freedom of agency. It refers to micro-processes of development of religious synthesis by – often relatively powerless – individuals who construct meanings for their own use out of contexts of cultural or political domination. Such syncretism typically occurs when a less powerful group is in contact with the religion of a more powerful group. In this circumstance, syncretism is a way of adaptation and survival. The less powerful group seeks commonalities between the religion of the powerful group and its own religion as a means of affirming traditional beliefs. The result is a belief system that recognises duality and embraces diversity (Lindenfeld, 2005). Both the case of the Tsimshians and the syncretic synthesis between the cult of the Virgin and the cult of Toniantzin are examples of such syncretism from below.

Syncretism from above refers to the imposition of religious synthesis upon others by powerful representatives of institutions and organizations who claim to channel the instrumental demands of a “system” through which cultural meanings are defined⁶. Perhaps one of the most accomplished and complex examples of syncretism from above emanating from a church hierarchy is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which combines religious and secular idea systems. This combination is

⁶ Examples include: Christian missionaries ‘africanising’ their churches by baptising selected deities and renaming local practices as Christian rituals (Meyer, 1992, Lindenfeld 2005); Hindu nationalists claiming that Hinduism subsumes Islam (van der Veer, 1994); Romans incorporating the Gods of conquered nations (e.g. the Egyptian Goddess Isis, the Persian God Mithra) as secondary deities in the Roman Pantheon. (Baird, 1991)

described by Kay and Brown (1985, p. 265) as “a highly evolved syncretic creation. It emphasized Jewish prophecies to substantiate Christian doctrines. It incorporated American federal land allocation policies, including order and equality in land division, which themselves owe their visible landscape expression to ancient Mediterranean survey methods. Mormons elevated the medieval English system of agricultural villages with common lands to the status of biblical Christian communitarianism. They granted absolute authority over land use to a church hierarchy, while asserting the democratic ideal of equal access to resources.”

White (1999) provides a non-religious example of the opposition and potential complementarity between syncretism from below and syncretism from above through his studies of the rural practice of integrated Western and Chinese medicine in South West China. Local corporate and urban party “elites” enacted processes of syncretism from above to force integration of Chinese and Western medical practices as sanctioned state policy. However, in stark contrast to other state policies, central authorities allowed individuals from local agencies and peasant communities to enact the process of syncretism from below by experimenting and making their own interpretation of how to shape integrated medicine as therapeutic practice.

Discussion

In this paper, we argue that the social dynamics stemming from, or taking place between, syncretism from below and syncretism from above (such as those described above) can be interestingly extended to the corporate context in a way that contributes new insights on the debate about CS. What is essentially induced in this argument is that pressures to promote sustainability are conceptualised in terms of systemic pressures descending from above (i.e., enactment of hegemonic power) and

constructionist pressures ascending from below (i.e., resistance to hegemonic power). This framing may help the debate about CS to escape from particularly entrenched patterns of thought. For example, strategy-making tends to be conceptualised as a combination of (or very often a dichotomy between) “top-down” planned strategy or “bottom-up” emergent strategy, including for sustainability (Neugebauer, Figge, & Hahn, 2016; Walker et al., 2015). Both approaches embody a starting point and direction of travel for pressure to adopt CS. The emphasis on top management’s role as a driver (Colwell & Joshi, 2013) and the analogies used of the sustainability strategist as chef or conductor tend to reinforce a notion of top-down strategy making. However, the reality may be more complex.

We suggest that the syncretic perspective provides for an alternative to the traditional use of the metaphors “top-down” and “bottom-up” by strategic thinkers. It may help us to foreground a conception of individual agents of management as dealing with CS-related pressures regardless of their position inside or outside a firm’s hierarchy or system of activities. Such agents can include front-line workers, middle managers acting as sustainability “champions”, top managers enacting their own altruistic aspirations against instrumental corporate logic or even external stakeholders (Hoppmann, Sakhel, & Richert, 2018). People at all levels within a firm may have first-hand experience of, and perspectives on, its environmental and social impact or performance. They will also learn about sustainability issues through their lives and experiences as citizens. Individual knowledge and perceptions represent a set of constructionist influences on the relationship between the firm and the environment. For example, individual voluntary citizenship initiatives in the workplace can play an essential role in improving the efficacy and efficiency of environmental management practices within organisations (Boiral, 2009). This is in line with Hofferberth, Bruhl,

Burkart, Fey and Peltner's (2011) argument that a company's receptiveness to societal expectations is determined by constructionist drivers that may be very different to the systemic pressures experienced "from above". As Robbins, Hintz, and Moore (2010, p. 132) note in discussing how to address the conceptual gap between nature and economy, "reconciling the material reality of the environment with the powerful social constructions that influence our thinking is a major challenge". The study of business strategy and the environment has frequently sought to understand the differences between organizations in progress (or lack of it) towards greater sustainability, and the internal and external factors shaping their responses. In the search for insight, researchers have applied theories including institutional theory (e.g., Colwell & Joshi, 2013; Delmas & Toffel, 2004), stakeholder theory (e.g., Delmas & Toffel, 2004; González-Benito & González-Benito, 2010), the resource based view (e.g., Borland, Ambrosini, Lindgreen, & Vanhamme, 2016; Dahmann & Brammer, 2011), and ambidexterity (Hahn et al., 2016). Van der Byl & Slawinski (2015) see paradox theory based approaches as offering the greatest promise to overcome the limitations of the "win-win" paradigm in dealing with the contradictions and complexities of CS. However, as they note, paradox-based approaches can be difficult to articulate and "sell" to management practitioners, and there seems little within the field to guide managers as to how perceived paradoxes should be addressed. Again, this may be an opportunity for a syncretic theory based approach to make a contribution. As Bagger (2007, p. ix) notes, although human beings by nature tend to avoid paradoxes, "...religious thought and practice have perpetuated, celebrated, and sublimed paradox".

A number of metaphors have also been adopted to better understand how strategists promote sustainability within organisations by recasting them in roles such as chef (Walker, Ni, & Dyck, 2015) or orchestral conductor (Peattie, 2004). This

naturally raises the question of why applying the theory of syncretism, and considering religious processes and roles as analogous to the quest of promoting CS, could contribute something new and potentially helpful.

The value of a syncretic perspective partly lies in the limitations of existing and dominant analogies, and theoretical lenses representing a set of “usual suspects” drawn from the strategy and organizations literature. The strength of the existing work lies in identifying the external and internal factors that are significant in determining a firm’s response to the sustainability challenge. For example, Walker et al. (2015) identify a typology of four different response configurations explained by a firm’s external environment, competitive strategy, top management involvement, attitudes towards stakeholders and strategic timeframe. Similarly, Papagiannakis, Voudouris, and Lioukas (2014) see differences in response as explained by resources, stakeholder pressures, industry regulatory demands, managers’ values and attitudes, and also by previous investments and decisions, and the feedback from them. Such work has helped to understand different types of response amongst companies and how they may progress through stages of increasing engagement with sustainability (e.g., Van Marrewijk & Werre, 2003). What is often lacking is a focus on the processes that can drive progression (or even regression) between particular stages of responsiveness, and importantly the role that culture, and clashes in cultures and values, may play in it. Although management culture and values are seen as factors shaping business sustainability (e.g., Colwell & Joshi, 2013; Van Marrewijk & Werre, 2003; Walker et al., 2015), they are frequently treated as monolithic and not an arena of potential conflict (with some exceptions such as Hoffman’s (1993) exploration of potential clashes between the environmental values of companies and individual employees).

By moving the debate beyond the potentially conflicts-free confines of the win-win paradigm, Hahn et al. (2010) brought the potential need to recognise and manage internal conflicts into focus. However, their exploration of managing the trade-offs that CS is likely to demand, through negotiation and compromise, is rooted in rational strategic decision making approaches, rather than in organisational culture or politics. Yet it is in this more value-laden territory that conflicts may arise. For example, in the mid-1990s a product manager within the Body Shop, generally conceived of from outside as having a unified, pro-sustainability culture, described to one of the authors a battle within the company of two factions, one prioritising an agenda of global market expansion for the company, and another that wanted to run it like a campaigning NGO. It was described at the time as a battle between two tribes, but it could perhaps best be understood as a battle between two competing faiths.

Syncretism theory can be used by scholars of the strategy-as-practice school to improve our understanding of how the micro-activities of strategists deal with tensions between action-takers and decision-makers at different organizational levels. In an organization, top decision-makers may have entrenched, conservative profit-driven values but younger, less powerful action-takers may hold more pro-environmental values and endorse the subsidiarity principle, believing, for instance, that it is their responsibility as individuals to take action to address the challenge of climate change. Syncretism theory suggests that these younger, less powerful actors will not engage in a process of potentially unproductive dialogue or negotiation to address trade-offs. Rather, they may act as the Tsimshians and use masking, externally maintaining the symbols and modes of representation of business-as-usual, while inconspicuously greening their micro-activities. For instance, purchasing greener products, favouring greener suppliers, selecting greener projects and technologies, introducing green

criteria in reporting, or simply greening day-to-day practices; all this without disclosing to top decision-makers or using profits, risks-related, operational or health & safety arguments to justify their actions. This tallies for instance, with research into brown-washing (Delmas & Grant, 2014, Kim & Lyon, 2014; Testa, Miroshnychenko, Barontini, & Frey, 2018) showing how firms understate or hide their environmental performance when experiencing non-green stakeholders pressures, and with findings by Liston-Heyes and Vazquez-Brust (2016) showing that middle-managers in firms with environmentally reactive top decision-makers will still implement proactive environmental practices unbeknownst to them. Here, syncretism theory informs us that the success of masking requires two things: affinity without concepts and distance between the actors holding different values. Such distance can be geographical (as in the case of Tsimshians villages and the centres of western power in Canada), but also distance between expertise; for instance, a manager without the expertise to assess the way in which technical staff implement cost-benefit or multicriteria analysis.

Syncretism can also contribute to Institutional theory, which has been used to explore the pressures companies face to become more sustainable (Colwell & Joshi, 2013). These include commonly experienced coercive pressures linked to industry regulation, normative pressures reflecting the professionalization of CS within an industry, and mimetic pressures as firms copy one another, all combining to produce isomorphism. Broadly speaking, strong institutional pressures are assumed to produce homogeneity in strategic responses (although as Milstein, Hart, and York (2002) demonstrate, sometimes strong pressures can instead produce heterogeneity). This tendency towards homogeneity may be moderated by intra-organizational dynamics such as top management commitment (Colwell & Joshi, 2013), but ultimately institutional theory is most helpful in explaining why companies end up resembling

each other strategically. It is less useful in understanding why one company might break ranks and innovate by adopting CS in the first place. The roots of this often lie in a sudden change in thinking by a strategic leader and/or the intervention of a charismatic external sustainability proponent. Walker et al.'s (2015) description of how "... the carpet company Interface changed relatively suddenly to become an environmental leader based on the new beliefs of its CEO, Ray Anderson" seems to have more commonality with religious revelation and conversion than conventional institutional process. The argument of a syncretic process in CS-related decision-making as an emergent construct that engages actors in continuously combining elements from a variety of idea systems might also explain why some types of CS response end up not reflecting the management team's commitment or stakeholder pressures as might be expected (cf. findings from Walker et al., 2015). Therefore, part of the value of a syncretism perspective may lie in its potential to provide alternative explanations for phenomena that conventional theoretical lenses struggle with, or for some of the unexpected results produced by research.

Syncretism may indeed generate a variety of (possibly unexpected) outcomes, according to whether elements of syncretism from below or from above are integrated, borrowed or rejected. One argument that emerges from the example of syncretism in Chinese medicine is that the syncretic integration of elements emerging from above and from below may lead to cohesion when a consensus is forged between the dominant and "oppressed" parties. The resulting syncretic balance between opposing forces may qualify as a "sustaincentric" outcome because as it stems from a process that favours moral pluralism (Gladwin et al., 1995), it integrates competing demands from businesses and their stakeholders (Hahn et al., 2010) and it juxtaposes and combines their economic and environmental concerns (Hahn, Figge, Pinkse, & Preuss, 2014).

Whether syncretic equilibrium is reached or not, syncretism should not be assumed to yield fixed or permanent results. The elements that constitute the equilibrium remain “alive” (i.e. pluralism is preserved) and are likely to be drawn apart at some point in the future. The uncertainty of wicked sustainability problems requires consistent attention to the syncretic dynamics at play. As adaptations stemming from either above or below become necessary, corporate actors and their wider stakeholder communities may be called upon to participate in syncretic dialogues. The syncretic perspective is in this sense a useful resource for directing attention towards the necessity of mobilising diverging interpretations and translations of sustainability (Meckenstock, Barbosa-Póvoa, & Carvalho, 2016), as well as identifying catalysts for change and areas of improvement at all levels and by all entities concerned with sustainability issues, from global to local scales.

Perhaps the most striking context in which understanding and applying syncretic processes could lead to progress, is in the field of corporate responses to climate change. Despite this being one of the grandest of challenges facing humanity, and a future existential threat to many businesses, it is an area where “business as usual” responses have predominated. In researching these responses, Wright and Nyberg (2017, p. 1657) note that: “Even among strong proponents of the need to respond to the climate crisis, our research reveals an almost inevitable process of converting such concerns into the more familiar and less threatening discourses of profit maximization and shareholder value”. The scale, scope and systemic uncertainty related to climate change demand a stronger harmony between natural and human systems (Winn et al., 2011). A syncretic perspective on its management could increase our understanding of how this might be developed. By bringing together systemic and constructionist drivers, syncretism may act to reduce reliance on business and market responses to the climate

crisis (Wright & Nyberg, 2017). It might also provide an alternative path for proponents of CS to use instead of relying on factual evidence and rational argument. Evidence from the climate change communications field suggests that detailed factual information and informed debate often fails to change entrenched opinions, and instead can lead to a counter-productive further entrenchment (Hobson & Niemeyer, 2013). Rationality and facts are often no match for beliefs founded on a lack of them, and an approach that recognises and uses the processes through which faiths are held and altered may offer more hope of progress.

The potential of syncretism to shape non-conventional, “game-changing” and long-lasting business-stakeholder relationships and dialogues is well documented in the religious and cultural literatures covered in this paper. Syncretic equilibrium ought to translate into dynamic human systems that are better suited to address human vulnerability to the disruptions and uncertainties of natural systems. While analyses of the rhetorics (Wright & Nyberg, 2017) and symbols (Bowen, 2014) that are used by companies to frame their initial response to socio-environmental challenges have demonstrated the importance of win-win references to define success, syncretism might be useful as a way to nuance the view of a final resolution to the CS challenge. Actors in a syncretic field continuously integrate, borrow and/or reject elements of cultural systems as they strive to reduce environmental uncertainties and change for the better. As such the application of syncretism in management might usefully contribute to explain how new forms of management for sustainability might emerge. Trends towards open innovation (Bogers, Chesbrough, & Moedas, 2018), social entrepreneurship (Kuznecova & Cirule, 2015), sociocracy (Romme, 2017) and brown-washing (Testa et al, 2018, Kim & Lyon, 2014) might all be taken to indicate that syncretic phenomena are currently taking place in business.

Concluding thoughts

The implication of the syncretic approach discussed in this article is that a company's ability to achieve cohesion between economic and socio-environmental responsibilities depends upon the interplay between constructionist pressures for syncretism from below, and the strategic response to systemic pressures represented by syncretism from above. Viewed from this perspective, syncretism has potential as [ENREF_53](#) a multi-level theory that "bridges the micro-macro divide, integrating the micro domain's focus on individuals and groups with the macro domain's focus on the organisation, environment and strategy" (Klein et al., 1999, p. 243).

Postmodern anthropologists observe that syncretic processes are now considered basic not only to religion and ritual but also to the predicament of culture in general (Stewart & Shaw, 1994). Positive syncretism is facilitated by current trends in population growth, industrialisation and globalisation (Greenfield, 2001), and as it becomes more widely experienced and observed within society, so its applicability to management processes is more likely to be appreciated.

Anthropologists Droogers and Greenfield (2001) and the management scholar Ghoshal (2005) converge on the idea that the discussion of theoretical perspectives has long suffered from oppositional thinking and a focus on one term in a pair of dichotomies – e.g. operational/normative, objectivism/subjectivism. The theory of syncretism should appeal to potential adopters as being significantly different from older, conventional management theories because it is integrative. As Pinto (1985, p. 22) explains: "at times syncretism may be even indispensable in the process of casting off the old and putting on the new". The "old" (traditional) company is independent, stable, efficient, risk-aware, controlled, self-focused, competitive, driven and

quantifiable. But these attributes are no longer good enough on their own for a company operating in an environment that is increasingly and negatively impacted by business activities.

It is perhaps the moral monism of traditional business models in which technocentric biases are concerned with the idea that the over-riding responsibility of business is to make profits that has a special interest in denying the possibility of syncretism. It induces the underestimation of sustainability interests while overestimating the social benefits of a market-free economy. In the religious context, negative syncretism is sometimes induced by underestimating the uniqueness of a particular faith while overestimating the validity of competing faiths (Hesselgrave, 2006). In the realm of business and management, negative syncretism may be taken to reflect the antagonism to paradigmatic synthesis shown by theorists or business practitioners concerned with the defence of “atomistic” theories, “traditional” management and business models (or conceptions of sustainability) and generally engaged in contrasting their favoured representations with those of other paradigms (Gioia & Pitre, 1990). It particularly captures the inhibitive function of enduring and outmoded mental models and ways of thinking on progress toward sustainability (Gladwin et al., 1995).

That paradigmatic change is difficult to achieve is widely recognised. Perhaps less widely recognised is that sustainability integration resembles a clash of beliefs and faiths as well as of ways of thinking. The technocentrists worship at the temple of the free market, embrace the doctrines of consumer sovereignty and shareholder value, and their faith is kept strong and pure by the expectations and exhortations from the High Priests to be found amongst the City Analysts, Management Consultancies, and Business Schools. The ecocentrists have an equally strong faith. Convinced of the moral

justice and logical wisdom of protecting the planet, they have their own liturgy of criticisms of “big business”, want to take a stand against the evils of globalisation and are inspired by their own shamanic visionaries who have founded successful business that put socio-environmental principles before profit. One reason why sustainability integration has been so difficult to achieve in practice is that it is not just a battle of competing business logics, but a battle of faiths. As such the notion of syncretism with its roots in religious synthesis may be far more relevant and useful than conventional approaches to combining the two which rarely seem to rise above a “win-win” appeal to logic.

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Table 1. Evaluating existing perspectives on business sustainability

Source	Perspective	Core argument	Limitation(s)
Valente (2010)	Complexity science	The examination of shifts in business paradigm should be accompanied by an appreciation of the interconnectedness of the private sector with a number of agents under a complex system.	Its emphasis on emerging crises in the existing technocentric paradigm as a driving force places an emphasis on the technical, rational and economic drivers of change and rather neglects some of the firm-level processes and human behavioural issues involved in the change that would occur within a particular business.
Starkey and Crane (2003)	Purposeful narrative	Using purposeful narratives within firms that aim to change the mental models applied by management will improve our understanding of sustainability oriented approaches.	Exactly how such narratives can gain credence and challenge the existing management paradigm remains under-explored.
Banerjee (2003)	Political economy	Sustainable development tends to promote the expansion of neo-colonial modes of development by obscuring significant differences in resource access and utilisation between countries.	Our ability to end the disruption of social system and ecosystem relations is limited to our understanding of how the power dynamics in this new era of globalisation and post-development, wherein the consumer is 'king' and technocentrism is the 'dominant' worldview, may change – a question raised, yet not resolved, in Banerjee's study.
Whiteman et al. (2013)	Ecology and social ecology	Sociological, institutional, and economic theories as foundations for research on corporate sustainability are incomplete without the integration of advancements in ecological knowledge, which together can form a multidisciplinary and ecologically-grounded foundation for sustainability. The scientific framework of Planetary Boundaries suggests that studies on corporate sustainability need a dual focus: on the firm (or the industry) and on the Earth system.	The quantitative approach of planetary boundaries as a means of 'measuring' sustainability excludes the consideration of constructivist influences such as culture and cognition. If, as the authors suggest, managerial intervention is necessary to steer our economic and environment systems away from catastrophe, a more holistic understanding of both pragmatic (or systemic) and subjective (or constructivist) challenges of managing a sustainable business, and how they can be made to cohere with each other, is arguably necessary.
Winn and Pogutz (2013)	Ecology and social ecology	Establishing business organisations as social-ecological systems provides a potentially solid framework for a managerial decision making respectful of the biophysical constraints of natural capital and opportunities resulting from more proactive approaches.	Considerations of individual and organisational factors (e.g. values) which fundamentally shape business strategies, innovations and organisation-nature interconnections are conspicuously absent from this study, so are considerations of the social dimension of sustainability.

Newton (2002)	Interdependency network Actor-network theory	In looking at the normative rationale for a new ecological order and suggesting a de-centring of business and a focus on networks as a new research perspective, the author presupposes conjoint economic development and ecological capacity-building. He contends that operating with a 'minimum interdependency networks' involving human and non-human agency will help identify a desirable level of interconnectedness between physical and human management systems.	The study is presented as a critique of the theoretically constrained and hypothetical (Gladwin et al., 1995) worldviews of ecocentrism and deep ecology. However, the interdependency network perspective falls short of explaining how the theoretical and practical constrains of the well-established worldview of technocentrism influence existing power relations between 'human' and 'non-human' actors and contribute to the sustainability of current networks of environmental degradation.
Berchicci and King (2007)	Win-win	Firms can create lasting value through more strategic attention to their environmental and social impacts.	Because the study focuses on the evaluation and comparison of the effectiveness of various green investment options for both environmental and financial performance of the firm, it provides a narrow view of CS as a means to economic performance only.
ENREF 37 Et zion (2007)	Win-win	Argues that organisations often tend to see sustainability as a separate aspect of core strategy and acknowledges the necessity of bridging the normative and descriptive in research on organisations as part of the broader theme of sustainability ad sustainable development.	The study corroborates the idea that two camps co-exists in business sustainability research: one that places emphasis on the relation between environmental and economic issues; the other where economic performance is not necessarily the central dependent variable examined. Etzion deplores the fact that attempts to engage in constructive dialogue between the two camps are rare. Related to this issue is the lack of theoretical support to bridging the ethical and instrumental camps in business and management research.