

Cambridge Judge Business School

CHRISTIAN THOUGHT AND SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

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Prelude

1. Christian thought (and other religious belief systems) is not only in line with but is **highly conducive** to the culture of sustainable consumption (**fairness, equity, stewardship**)
2. In many countries, the **churches** and the **peace movements** (1980, 1990) were important drivers for the development of sustainable consumption and its acceptability and attractiveness (Fair Trade, Global South justice)
3. Once sustainable consumption has left its niche, faith inspired values, combined with a new strong climate and environmental movement, were important to **mainstream** more sustainable products and services.
 - 2010s: Climate & Environmental movements gained influence in politics, supply-side gets more interested in sustainable consumers (producers, retail) and public procurement rules change
 - 2015: UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 12) inspired more concrete regulation (e.g. EU Green Deal)
 - Today, depending on the sector (food, textiles, mobility, building, communication, investments), a relevant consumer segment prefers sustainable options (between 10-40%).

Socially Responsible / Sustainable Consumption



Webster (1975) – social conscious consumer “considers the public consequences of private consumption or who attempts to use his purchasing power to effect change”



Reisch (1998) – sustainable consumption “involves making choices that minimize the environmental impact, promote health, and contribute to social well-being of current and future generations”



Mohr et al. (2001) – “Purchasing, using, and disposing of products with the intention of minimizing or eliminating any harmful effects and maximizing the long-term beneficial impacts on society”

SDG 12



Responsible consumption and production



Challenges

Every year about **ONE THIRD OF ALL FOOD PRODUCED** – equivalent to 1.3 billion tones – IS **WASTED** while 1 billion people remain undernourished and another 1 billion go to bed hungry



Solutions

REDUCE THE FOOD WASTED by producers, retailers and consumers



HOUSEHOLDS CONSUME 29% OF GLOBAL ENERGY contributing to 21% of CO₂ emissions



SWITCH TO ENERGY EFFICIENT LIGHTING to save \$120 billion every year and prevent 16 billion tons of carbon emissions over the next 25 years



The world's **FRESH WATER SUPPLY** such as rivers and lakes **ARE POLLUTED** at much faster rate than nature can recycle and purify



REDUCE THE RELEASE OF CHEMICALS AND WASTE into the air, water and soil



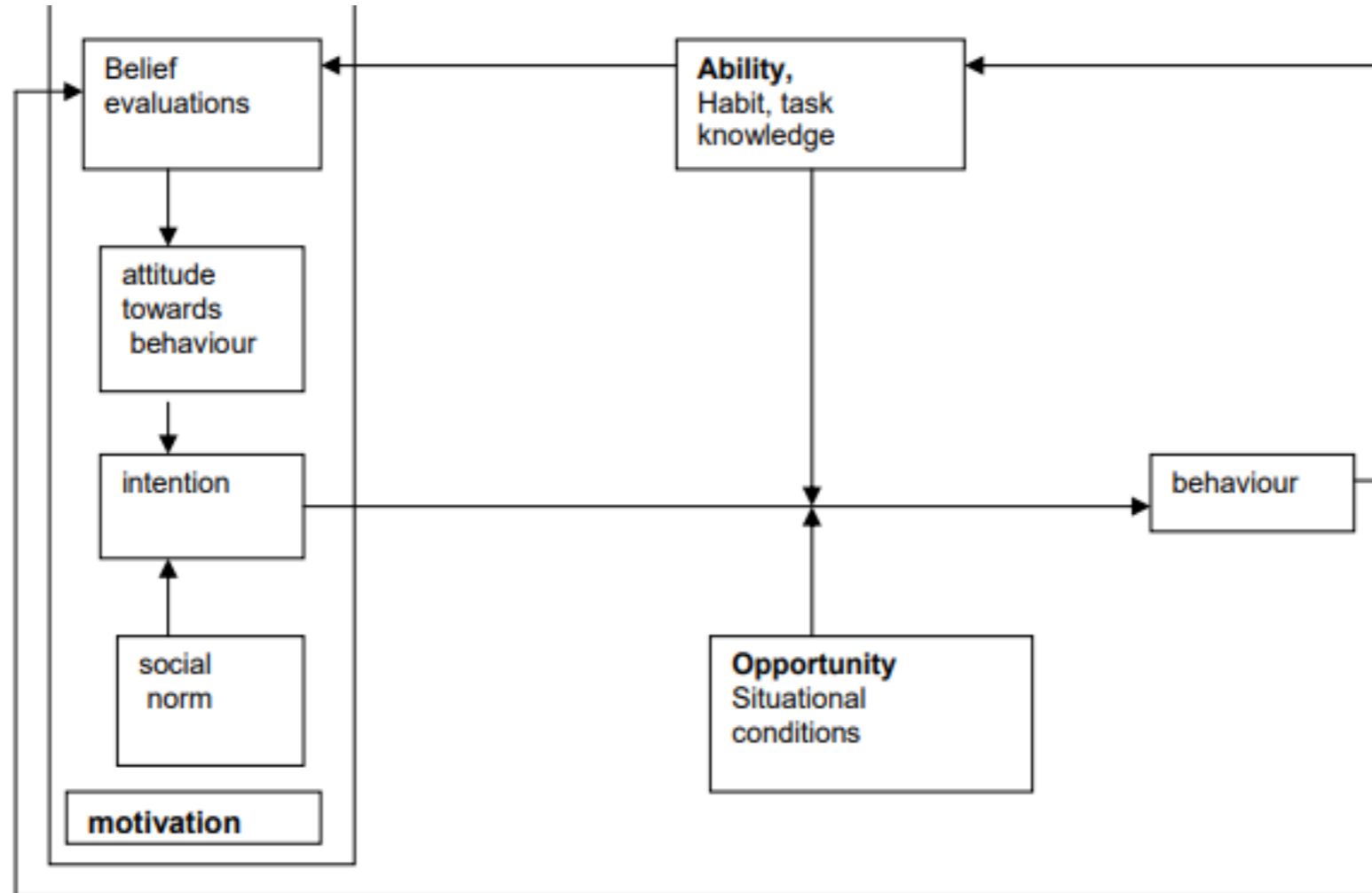
Strategies for Sustainable Consumption

1. BETTER: efficiency, innovation
2. LESS: sufficiency, moderation
3. SMARTER: new materials, bioeconomy
4. SELF: prosumerism, own-production, DYS
5. CIRCULAR: circular economy, repair, zero waste
6. TOGETHER: collaboration in communities, sharing

Key behavioural barriers to sustainable consumption

- **Present bias and hyperbolic discounting** – “future generations”
- **Loss aversion** – people are (double) more negative about anticipated losses than they are positive about anticipated gains
- **Low salience** – many consequences of our current consumption are invisible (GHG) and below sensing threshold; or happen somewhere else (extreme weather? Heat-related deaths? Floods and droughts?)
- **Missing immediate feedback** – consequences are in the future or elsewhere, we need feedback to reinforce learning
- **Consumer confusion** – complex decision-making, hassle factor, effort-full choices (accessibility, availability, affordability, attractiveness)
- **Probabilistic harms** – climate attribution often unclear, **misinformation and disinformation**
- **Polarization** - based on political ideologies; groupthink and echo chambers
- **Free riding** as regards the provision of public goods – on individual and nation level
- **Distrust** in collectively managing the “commons” (the “tragedy of the commons”)
- **No specific villain** – the results of countless faceless people colluding

Religiosity reflects fundamental belief systems (in the Motivation-Opportunity-Ability model of behaviour)



Source: Based on Ölander and Thøgersen (1995)

The potential of religious traditions

- Shape an individual's system of values and beliefs – as well as collective action
- Rich in values, beliefs, narratives, symbols, scriptures, and practices that emphasize simple living, social justice, altruism, and environmental stewardship, care for the creation
- Counter-consumerism – against throwaway culture, overconsumption, neophilia and wastefulness
- Promote a culture of moderation – the primacy of “being” over “having”, community over selfishness
- Promote a culture of education and prayer – identity, spirituality (less need to compensate for “emptiness” and boredom), mindfulness practice and inspiration
- Promote the duty of solidarity with the poor and excluded
- Teach love for one's neighbour, compassion for others (including ethical treatment of animals)
- Promote ethical business practices, e.g. regarding interest and debts (e.g., Islamic banking, Caritas, Jewish Jubeljahr)
- Churches are (largely untapped) communities and networks that influence everyday practice

Examples from the Catholic Church



Are these values reflected in actual behaviour?

Some (eclectic) empirical findings

- UK: **Churchgoing** has a weak yet significant positive influence on ecologically and socially conscious and frugal consumer behaviour. Churchgoers had less materialistic values and higher levels of altruism (Pepper et al., 2011).
- US (Christian) and South Korea (Buddhist): **religious affiliation** and **level of religiosity** significantly influence sustainable consumption behaviours (Minton et al., 2015). “Religion can help explain the attitude-behaviour gap.”
- Poland: Stepwise introduction of restrictions on **Sunday shopping** in Poland (2018), based on religious arguments, became popular among atheist groups, a political coalition was formed (Sadowski, 2021)
- Poland: Level of **religiousness** (prayer) and socially conscious consumption found to be positively correlated (Jablonska-Karcmarczyk, 2024)
- **Intrinsic religiosity** usually has a positive influence on consumer ethics due to greater concern for ethics and higher moral standards; religious values are more enduring values systems than cultural values (Minton et al., 2022)

Afterthoughts

- ‡ Maybe the UN Declaration of Human Rights says it all? Without the risks of zealots and “–ism”
- ‡ What drives the differences? Religion or culture? Collectivism vs individualism? Western religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) believe that God created nature and therefore God and humans are in a superior position to nature *versus* Eastern religions (Buddhism, Hinduism) follow a pantheistic view, and god is part of nature.
- ‡ Religion is itself affected by consumer culture – religious beliefs as commodities (that can easily be discarded). Evangelical churches and cults that misuse power and influence.
- ‡ Tension between individual choices and systemic change to move towards more sustainable consumption. Does religion focus too much on the I-level? (“opium for the masses?") Or does it rather encourage collective efforts?

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