

Theological Significance of Sustainable Development

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Abstract: There is a combat today between economy, ecology and technology. In order to reduce this combat, a new approach developed under the umbrella of sustainable development. As a result of various environmental problems, the relationship between religion, development and environment became a hot issue in the field of religion. Today, a theological approach known as ecotheology is very influential among the followers of various religious movements. In this regard, one of the main questions is this: What are sustainable values for a sustainable development? In this paper, we will argue that religion could play an important role as a provider of sustainable values for a sustainable development and the necessity of spirituality for it.

The word *crisis* has often been used by many people in order to express the present state of our planet and humanity. Most of us think that our planet and humanity is in crisis, because as whole humanity we are facing great problems, such as arms race, economic stagnation, the depletion of nonrenewable resources, climate change, widespread malnutrition, the explosion of population and so on. Humanity and our planet experienced many disasters throughout human history. But our present crisis differs from previous ones, since it is the first time we are experiencing the possibility of total extinction of humanity and planet. Every year in Earth Day (22 April) people express their worries about the future of the planet and ecological problems such as the diminishing biodiversity, global warming, depleting fish stock, deforestation and so on. The conservation of our habitats and species is one of the most important problems of the day. The fact of our day can be expressed as follows: “Our planet and humanity are in peril.”

When we talk about the crisis of environment, planet and humanity, it means that we are talking about the crisis of creation. “Our planet and humanity are in peril” means creation is at risk. Environment is often used as the key word in our present day discussions. But we prefer creation, instead of environment, because the term creation is a broader term than environment. Creation involves a richer and deeper moral and spiritual universe. Furthermore, the term environment separates human from natural. As a matter of fact, human and nature are complementary parts of creation. We are an essential part of God’s creation and Creation will not fulfill its purpose apart from us. The term environment is a useful concept, which focuses our attention merely on the natural world, but it is not a sufficient conceptual tool, which directs us to care for both human and natural creation.

Modern non-spiritual values are not helpful to make man and woman as the friend of environment and creation. As a result of materialism and scientism, human being become someone, who does not care about creation, because he/she does not see any connection between himself/herself and creation. Modern man/woman suppose that human activity does not give harm to the earth, nature and creation and destroy its balance. Although environmentalism criticizes modern man’s attitude toward nature, it has not been able to create a paradigm, which revolves around the fundamental values of human society. Modern values makes human being’s care of free environment

Our creational problems have mostly been produced by modern economy, science and technology, because we do not use them in the service of of creation, rather they become effective mechanisms, which exploit human and natural worlds together. Furthermore, there is a serious combat between them. What we need today is not combat, but collaboration. Economy, science and technology must collaborate with each other in order to combat against malnutrition, population growth, poverty, climate change and other natural problems.

The followers of various religions are also concerned about the present state of the world and they start to express their views about nature, technology, development and so on. As a theological approach ecotheology is very influential among religious people. Many religions and spiritual movements aim to restore humankind’s lost unity and connection with the cosmic order. In order to do it, religion serves as a way, which criticizes the present condition as well as provides spiritual values for a more sustainable human life. In this paper, we intend to criticize modern materialism and present our reflections, which support the idea of sustainable development from theological perspective.

One of the modern tendencies is the trivialization of religious and spiritual convictions and push them toward the margins of human culture. Many people think that there is no connection between our religious-spiritual convictions and our ideas about development, nature, ecology and so on. Spirituality and religion have

been regarded as a taboo and excluded from the field of development.¹ Separating state and religion could be a good thing in the field of politics, but the same separationism cannot be considered as constructive in the field of nature and development. It is requirement of our day to restore connections between religion-spirituality and other areas of human life, such as ecology, economy and development.

In the face of great ecological, natural, social and human problems, it is no longer possible to practice irresponsible, unmanageable and endless development programs on the Earth. In order to save humanity and Earth, there is an urgent need for a new, responsible and humanly vision. The journal of *Scientific American* calls such vision as 'Managing Planet Earth.'² The essence of this vision is the idea of sustainable development. According to the idea of sustainable development, the exploitation of our human and natural resources must be prevented and the direction of investments, the orientation of technological developments and institutional changes must meet human needs and aspirations.³ In other words, the vision of sustainable development seeks a sustainable balance between human and nature, technology and ecology, economy.

Conservation and maintainance of the world is the basic objective behind sustainable development. We are responsible for today as well as for tomorrow. It is important to consider our present needs, but this is not enough. We must also reflect and act responsibly for the preservation of the needs of future generations. Sustainable development aims to accomodate the ability of continual development and a constrained process of dynamic change for human and natural well-being together.

The idea of sustainable development is a challenge for humanity, because it requires the harmony between human, nature and development and make development, which is unmanageable so far, as manageable. Human desire for progress is not the only one, which must determine ecology, economy and science. Sustainable development aims to create a world, in which human needs would simply be one among many needs of Earth and humanity.

The vision of sustainable development implies that growht is no longer the only objective of development. The qualities of life, eradication of powerty, elimination of regional imbalances, the well-being of individual and society and various environmental concerns became central parts of development. Instead of growth, the concept of justice became the chief focus of sustainable development, which seeks a balance between economy, ecology, individual and society. The vision of sustainable development does not neglect the spiritual well-being of human individuals, instead it recognizes the satisfaction of the spiritual needs of individuals as important as economic needs. Sustainability and spirituality are united in the vision of sustainable development.

What is the value of sustainable development from theological perspective? Basically, sustainable development represents a state of harmony between God, humanity, society and nature. Our understanding of sustainable development, first of all, is not antropocentric, because it makes God, society and nature as centers alongside with man. Secondly, our theological understanding is not utilitarian, which could cause the efficient exploitation of human and natural resources.

We need to reconceive humanity in the light of nature and God and understand also God and nature in the light of antropology. Antropology, sociology, theology and ecology are becoming natural elements of sustainable developments, because the law of creation is this: 'everything and everyone is connected to everything else and every one.'⁴

God created human being as His representative in the world and put the Earth under the service of humankind. Although the earth is under the service of humankind, human being has the responsibility to protect the Earth against destruction. Being God's representative on the earth does not mean that man/womankind is absolute lords and masters of the world, that nature has no master except man/woman. The absolute masterhood of humankind over the Earth could create an alienation between humanity and nature. Human being is not the master of the world, but he/she is its custodian.

Today, human being have failed to do his/her responsibility as God's representative in the world, because human activity, modern technological and scientific progress do not protect the Earth, but destroy it. Some people talk about the Earth as 'the wasteworld'⁵ in order to conceptualize the dangers the Earth facing.

¹ K.A.V.Beek, Spirituality: A Development Taboo?, Development in Practice, vol. 10, no. 1, February 2000. www. developmentinpractice.com

² See: Scientific American, *Managing Planet Earth*, New York : W.H. Freeman, 1990.

³ World Commision on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, Oxford : Oxford University Pres, 1987, p. 46.

⁴ This is a revision of Commoner's 'law of ecology', which is expressed as follows: 'Everything is connected to everything else.' See: B.Commoner, *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man and Technology*, New York : Knopf, 1971, p. 33.

⁵ T.Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, San Francisco : Sierra Club Boks, 1988, p. 29.

Environmentalism movement accuses man for the present state of the world. Calvinism also considers humankind as the cancer of the earth. If human activity could cause the destruction of the nature and the world, so there must be something wrong and dangerous in human nature. Such inhuman qualities, like human selfishness, greed and rapacious exploitation of natural resources, make man/woman as the chief destroyer of nature and society. The absolute control and use of nature for human needs and purposes could destroy the planet itself. In order to avoid such disaster, it is necessary for man/woman to learn to limit himself/herself while he/she deals with nature and creation. Religion is the most influential teacher, who could say to human being: 'Limit himself/herself.'

God reminds humankind the delicate proportions of the universe and commands him/her to maintain its natural balance. God allows man/woman to use everything within limits, but He does not allow them to use natural resources wastefully. Man/woman must have virtuous qualities so that they could act God's responsible representative in the world. Religion demands from man/woman, who is considered to be as the representative and co-worker of God, spiritual growth not materialism, contentment not greed, patience not recklessness, moderation not maximisation, balance not combat, cooperation not conflict, establishing justice not corruption.

It is often assumed that man/woman has the absolute right to rule all creation without any limitation. Many religions try to substitute this idea by the equal respect for all creatures. Unfortunately, religions could not achieve the first idea by the second, which requires respect for all creatures. The real spiritual revolution is to limit human rule regarding creation. As long as man/woman does not feel the need to limit his/her actions in the realm of nature and creation, it is impossible to institutionalize the idea of sustainable development in the hearts and soul of man.

Human beings naturally have limitless and unsatisfied desires. They do not want merely something, they want to have everything. Desire for having everything leads man and woman to elevate three things to the level of God. These are science, technology and economy. Modern man and woman believe that science ultimately gives them the knowledge of everything, technology will provide facilities to do everything and economy would give them opportunity to have everything. Briefly, modern man/woman suppose that he/she must have everything and consume everything. Consumerism become the distinct quality of modern man/woman, who practices consumerism as his/her life style and invents a culture around it. Acquisitive nature of human being and the religion of consumerism makes the situation of world worse, not better. Excessive consumption and acquisition wipe out our present as well as our future. There is no preservation and restraint in the modern culture of consumerism, which jeopardizes the future of our children. If the culture of consumerism continues to prevail, future generations could not even have our present positions. From religious perspective, the culture of sustainability and spirituality must replace the culture of consumerism. Religion totally rejects the culture of consumerism and encourages people to be moderate in their consumption, not to be excessive.

The hegemonic understanding of science, technology and economy must be changed. The true totalitarianism of our time is scientific, technological and material totalitarianism. Science, technology and economy are not deities, who could give us everything. They are just limited means, through them we could satisfy our limited needs. As Mesthene says, 'technology is man's toolbox.'⁶ They are not tools for our unsatisfied appetite for power and possession. Our blind faith in science, technology and economy is one of the chief sources of global crisis. The idea of sustainable development compels us to give up our blind faith in science, technology and materialism, and develop a new perspective toward them. Religion could provide a spiritual and moral compass while science and technology supply vehicles for sustainable development. Sustainable development is not to limit the rate of economic growth, but it is an approach which aims to change the quality and quantity of growth, preserve the present state of the world and push people to value the world as the highest level.

We no longer value our life and planet in the highest terms. Materialistic understanding of economics is a clear indication of the devaluation of everything. Economical materialism reduces everything to commodity as something produced for making profit. However, everything is not commodity. Human being and the world are not commodities. They mean more than that. There is a spiritual, human and personal dimension in our lives and our environments. Treating human life and the world as commodity threatens the existence and stability of the human and natural life.

Our relationships with society and nature should be *human* relationships. In other words, it must be I-Thou relationships. Kinship, religion and community protect human essence of social relations. But today our relations become I-It relations, instead of I-Thou. In other word, we are treating each other not as human being, but as a thing. Religion and spirituality could help to re-humanize our dehumanized relations. Almost all of the grave dangers threatening human and planetary existence originate from human actions. However, much shallow thinking on sustainable development has focused exclusively on the relationships of people with the

⁶ Cited in W., Gunston, 'Technology for Man's Survival,' in E. Bono, (Ed.), *Technology Today*, London : Routledge, 1971. p. 60.

natural environment - without considering the dimension of people-to-people relationships, which is the heart of a sustainable human society. In this regard, religion has a role to play, because moral and spiritual values of religion traditionally encourage people-to-people and people-to nature relations in a more humanely and sustainable way.

Spiritualization of development is needed as much as the humanization of our relations is necessary. Materialist development is not compatible with the vision of sustainable development. In order to actualize sustainable development, the spiritualization of development is a vital requirement, which makes possible the participation of individual spiritually and emotionally to the process of sustainable development. Spiritually sustainable development is not a type of development, which has only material dimension. A healthy economical and ecological paradigm must satisfy our material and spiritual demands together. Spiritualization of development includes two dimensions: The first one is *God cares about us and our world* and the second one is *we care about God and His creation*.

We lost our spiritual quality, which encourages us to care about God and His creation. We become the prisoners of materialist subjectivism, which merely focused on the satisfaction of our material desires. The ideology of selfism has been promoted by media, school and so on. A selfist character does not have ability and capacity to go beyond his/her boundaries and be someone who deeply cares about the rest of creation and acts for the sake of God. There is a need to develop a new spiritual-educational approach, which aims to flourish the character and commitments that will go beyond this self-centredness. Selfism and greed are the main temptations, which lead human being to violate the proportions of creation and damages its balance. Religion is one of the most influential factors, which deeply influences human thought, emotion and behavior. Religion provides a set of beliefs, which asks people to go beyond selfism and materialism. Religious beliefs can be used in order to guide human relationships with society and nature in a way which contribute to spiritual and material development and well-being.

Sustainable development aims to make developmental process as a human act, which is ecologically and economically sustainable. Sustainable development does not represent a blind opposition to progress, but it tries to present an alternative vision to blind progress. In this vision, there are three essential objectives. The maintaining of the economic growth in the long run is the first objective. The second objective is to achieve intergenerational justice in the use of natural resources. The third objective is to restrict the increase in pollution, deforestation, the diminish of biodiversity and climate change for preserving the present state of environment. The idea of sustainable development implies limits and boundaries for physical, material and economical growth. There are limits to "external" (physical, socio-economic) human development. But there are no limits to "internal" (growth in knowledge, emotional maturity, spiritual depth) human development. There are also no boundaries for each and every human person to find inner tranquility and satisfaction by giving himself/herself to the rest of God's creation.

In modern era, our priorities have been changed. We do everything for the sake of a limitless material and economical growth while we do almost nothing for a limitless spiritual development. It is impossible to have a limitless material growth, but it is possible to experience a limitless spiritual progress. It is time to limit material development and focus on spiritual development, which can provide a sustainable moral and educational framework for sustainable development. Population explosion, agricultural production, the decrease in natural resources, industrial production and pollution are the main factors, which necessitate the limit to growth.⁷ Sustainable development is meaningful, affective and fruitful if it applies itself as human development, which based on spirituality as the top priority in order to meet external needs of creation.

Summing up, sustainable development has moral, social, scientific, psychological, spiritual and political dimensions. Economists or economics alone cannot resolve it. Without spirituality there is no sustainable development. Without self-restraint there is no ecological, social and individual human sustainability. Spirituality helps us to see the material part of life in relative terms and limit our acts. Spirituality also teaches us that we would be accountable for our behaviors in the presence of God in Hereafter. We are not only responsible for our behaviors in this world, but also we will be accountable in the next world. Our accountability not only includes our individual and social sins, but also it contains our environmental sins. So we must watch our actions, and learn to act more responsibly, spiritually and humanely.

⁷ See: D.H.Meadow, D.L.Meadows, J.Randers, W.W.Behrens, *The Limits to Growth*, New York : Signet, 1972.