

Science, Religion and Development

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INTRODUCTION

The triple theme of science, religion and development initially emerged from an initiative taken by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), which is based in Canada and has promoted research on development for several decades. A few years ago, IDRC asked Dr William F. Ryan, a well-known economist and development practitioner, to travel around the world and interview some two hundred leaders of thought working in the field of development. His question to them focused on the role of culture and spirituality in development.

One of the interesting findings of Dr. Ryan's study was that almost all those interviewed felt that development strategies and planning had not taken into account the culture and spirituality of the people of the world. There seemed to be uniform agreement that development had been too materialistic in its approach. Further to this conclusion, they confessed that within their own organizations and in their own life, they (the development workers) recognized the importance of spirituality and tried to incorporate it into their actions. However, knowing that such words and concepts were not welcomed by international aid agencies in project proposals and reports, they had developed two languages - one internal for their own work and the other external for making presentations to their donors so that they could obtain support. This is quite an interesting confession that came not from ten or twenty people but from a great many people who are running large development programmes around the world.¹

Following this research, IDRC invited a group of people from several countries to evaluate Dr. Ryan's study. The questions put before the group were: What shape would a development policy take so as to acknowledge the spiritual dimensions of human existence and to integrate both the material and spiritual nature of human existence? How would the resulting programmes differ from thousands of projects to alleviate poverty, which have been operating for decades? What would some of the outstanding features of such programmes be?

One of the conclusions reached by the group was this:

It seemed to us, the group said - that we have to look deeper into the question of spirituality and culture if we are to succeed in re-evaluating the development enterprise. We have to go to the level

¹ Study Report is recorded on the book “*The Lab, the Temple and the Market*”.

of systems of knowledge, because in the final analysis, development efforts rest on the foundations of the various disciplines of modern science in which we have all been educated, irrespective of where we are from. Most of us have studied in universities and academic centres that have been influenced by Western tradition, which has defined the disciplines and professions that we bring to the field of development. Whether we are anthropologists, sociologists, economists, agronomists, medical doctors, social workers or educators, the knowledge system that underlies our thinking and according to which policies are formed, plans made, and programmes created comes essentially from that tradition. At some point in the evolution of Western Thought, it was decided by the academia - by the intellectual powers of Europe and North America - that science and religion were in conflict with each other. As a result, the knowledge system of the West became extremely secular. The question of religion and spirituality was either rejected entirely or, at best, left to the realm of individual personal concern, far from the public domain where important decisions about the structures and processes of society are made.²

The group then had to ask its members whether they accepted this duality- namely that religion and science are in conflict, that religion belongs to the age of humanity's childhood, and that an educated humanity will either abandon religion altogether or regard it merely as a personal matter with no real relevance to the society.

If that is a basic assumption underlying development thinking and planning, then how could we talk about a new development paradigm that gives due consideration to the spiritual dimension of human existence? In response to this question, the theme of science, religion and development arose within the group. To address these issues the following observations need special attention.

1. ALARMING TRENDS

The field of development became a formalized enterprise after the Second World War. In the midst of all the difficulties of the world at that time, with the conflict between Marxist and Capitalist regimes, with the cold war and a myriad adversities, a great deal of effort went into what was considered to be the social and economic development of the nations of the planet. Although five decades have passed, the results of these efforts are rather disappointing.

In 1972 Mr. Robert McNamara, then president of the World Bank, announced in a speech in Nairobi that the number of people who were living in absolute poverty in the world had reached eight hundred million - that was despite two decades of development effort, which had begun in the 1950s. This announcement caused a great deal of agitation among development workers all over the world. As a result, many programmes were created to alleviate poverty and policies were rapidly changed, even at the level of the World Bank. Three decades later, the number of absolute poor rose to over 1.2 billion.³ This is the tragedy by itself. But another tragedy is the fact that when this number was announced a few years ago, the announcement did not create the same kind of commotion that was created in 1972 as a result of the Nairobi announcement. The 1.2 billion figure was met with almost no response. It would indeed be a tragedy if the world has become accustomed to worsening conditions, and all of the propaganda depicting

² Supra, p.

³ World Bank Report , Year

material prosperity that the media is feeding to the masses has made humanity numb to the reality that things are not going very well.

One fifth of humanity is living in absolute poverty with less than a dollar a day income; another one fifth is somewhat better off. That is two fifths of humanity - 2.4 billion people more or less. Then, at the other extreme, there is about one fifth of humanity with access to eighty seven percent of all the resources of the world, using it and prospering. These two extreme groups keep moving farther and farther away from each other. The gap between the poor and the rich increases year by year.

After five decades of effort by development workers and other agencies, does the trend show that the fight against poverty and underdevelopment is being won? At the very least, is the trend encouraging?

The present situation is not, of course, due to any naivety on the part of development theory or a lack of ideas about development practice. The development thinking was very simplistic fifty years ago. Increasing the gross national product (GNP) through industrialization was the basic theory in the 50s. But development thinking gradually became more and more sophisticated as it incorporated a growing number of elements: agriculture, population, health, education, environment, distribution of wealth, land distribution, role of women and the importance of the participation of the people themselves in development projects and decision making. Every factor has been considered, and each one of them has been the focus of a long train of books whose pages set forth the most convincing arguments. When one reads the literature in this field and reviews the reports of related international conferences and international aid agencies, one is struck by the depth and breath of the ideas. It is people-centered development, and every possible factor has been analyzed. Then one looks at the reality, at the numbers, at the results – and one wonders why the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen each decade.

This is not to say that development projects have not experienced success.

The governments of the world have, collectively, begun to acknowledge a spiritual dimension to development. This can be seen in the global action plans that emerged from the great world conferences held in the 1990's by the United Nations. In 1991, the governments of the world, with significant contributions from global civil society, drafted Agenda 21, a remarkably forward-looking strategy for the achievement of sustainable development worldwide.⁴ Agenda 21, called for "social, economic and spiritual development", recognizing that "individuals should be allowed to develop their full potential". A next step was the World Summit that took place in Johannesburg, South Africa, in August 2002 and was called to "identify major constraints hindering the implementation of the Agenda 21" and to "address new challenges and opportunities that have emerged since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development."

⁴ Agenda 21, Chapter 6.3&6.23. Emphasis added.

Another example is the Copenhagen Declaration where the governments of the world unambiguously affirm that “our societies must respond more effectively to the material and spiritual needs of individuals, their families and communities in which they live...not only as a matter of urgency but also as a matter of sustained and unshakable commitment through the years ahead”. In the Beijing Platform for Action, one reads that “religion, spirituality and belief play a central role in the lives of millions of women and men, in the way they live and in the aspiration they have for the future.” And in the Habitat Agenda, the world’s governments commit to “ achieving a world of greater stability and peace, built on ethical and spiritual visions.”⁵

But as a whole, poverty and violence have increased, while security has decreased; hope has receded, and despair rules the lives of most of the people in the world regardless of where they live.

This does not mean that the programmes for the environment, for women, for agriculture, for micro-enterprise, for children, for education and others should discontinue. However, there are a number of underlying considerations that need to be examined and taken into account to arrive at solutions that go beyond a superficial treatment of the world's problems.

2. WAYS OF LOOKING AT THIS DILEMMA

One way that is being proposed to look at the above dilemma has been articulated in the book *The Lab, the Temple, and the Market: Reflections at the intersection of Science, Religion and Development*, published in 2001. This was also the subject of a presentation by Dr. Firaydoun Javaheri in June 2002 in Zambia. It was proposed to look at this dilemma as the failure of materialism. The leaders of humanity, especially those in the West who held large shares of power, made some gross miscalculations during the early part of the twentieth century, which is when it became possible for humanity to come together as one for the first time because of scientific, technological and cultural advances. One mistake was to assume that material development was the only thing worth pursuing - that material considerations were the main determinants of human existence. Basically, they forgot, or ignored, the spiritual nature of humankind and the role of religion in influencing human attitudes and spirit with which people do everything, including development projects. Despite the brilliance of its thinkers and having the entire power of science behind them, they made a fundamental mistake about human nature. In all the theories they advanced, in the literature they wrote, in the educational programmes they spread around the world, and in the economic systems they took around the globe, whether falling into Marxist or Capitalist camps, they misjudged human nature. They somehow reached the conclusion that what mattered most was to improve material conditions. They failed to realize that unless both material civilization and spiritual civilization advance hand in hand, humanity could not prosper. It is not in

⁵ Series of world’ conferences refers to the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development No 3, platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Chapter 2, No 24, Habitat Agenda, Chapter 1, No 4, Preamble.

human nature to be a material being alone, just as it is not in the nature of the human being to want to live in poverty, thinking of the next world only. Material development is important and essential to humanity to be able to pursue its spiritual and other goals.

3. THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF SCIENCE, RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT

It is the above-mentioned mistake on the part of the leaders of the world that now has to be corrected. Solutions lie not at the level of theoretical debate - whether to follow this or that development theory. The very foundation and assumptions on which developments rests must be redefined. It is true that we have to turn to science, as it is this knowledge system, which studies the material universe and teaches us how to generate material means to the advancement of humanity. But at the same time, religion should not be forgotten. However, by religion is not meant a specific religion or a specific sect, but religion as the spiritual heritage of humankind and the knowledge system that studies the power of the human spirit and is concerned with the demands and the desires of the higher nature of the human being.

It is in this sense that a discourse on science, religion and development is promoted. If such a discourse is to be successful, it cannot remain in the realm of appealing statements about the importance of spirituality. It has to go further and re-examine policy, rethink strategies and determine how these two sources of knowledge, science and religion, which have always motivated humanity, can be brought together to achieve progress. To do that it has to be accepted that there is no real conflict between science and religion. On the contrary, the two need each other - that science without religion becomes the cruel instrument of materialism, and religion without science falls prey to superstition and fanaticism. Furthermore, both science and religion would have to be viewed differently. The purpose of religion is to bring unity, without denying the diversity of expressions of the spiritual aspirations of the human soul. The great religious traditions of the world must become the cause of peace and unity. To this end, they must seek within each other those things that bind them together, those profound truths that exist in all of them and upon which they all agree. They cannot be the cause of strife and cannot be used to promote hatred. "If religion is to play a meaningful role in the work that lies ahead, there has to be some kind of a process to build harmony among the great religious traditions themselves. ...It is becoming increasingly clear that passage to the culminating stage in the millennia long process of the organization of the planet as one home for the entire human family cannot be accomplished in a spiritual vacuum". (*A Statement to the World Summit on Sustainable Development by the Bahá'í International Community*)⁶

It is, therefore, inconceivable that a peaceful and prosperous global society – a society that nourishes a spectacular diversity of cultures and nations- can be established and sustained without directly and substantively involving the world's great religions in its design and support.

⁶ Issued at August 26, 2002 in Johannesburg, South Africa.

The United Nations, the initiator of most of the projects on the global level, has been hesitant to invite religions for their inputs.

Unfortunately, the UN has been unable to move beyond its Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, to create a convention on freedom of religion and belief.

Some of the global action plans from recent United Nations conferences suggest that misuse of religion poses an obstacle to development.

Agenda 21 mentions religion, but with no reference to the impact that its misuse has on development. It is observed that tragically, organized religions, whose very purpose is to serve the cause of brotherhood and peace, behave all too frequently as one of the most formidable obstacles in this path and lend credibility to the fanaticism of sub-groups within major religious traditions.

The real onus, however, is on the religions themselves. The followers of religions and, more importantly, religious leaders, must show that they are worthy partners in the great mission of building a sustainable civilization. To do so will require that religious leaders work conscientiously to exorcise religious bigotry and superstition from within their faiths and renounce claims to religious exclusivity and finality.

The attitude towards science has to change too. Not regarding its proven theories, but regarding its role. Science does not have the answer to every question about human existence. Although through science we can discover the physical laws of our universe, science alone cannot help us find the meaning of our existence.

If science and religion are truly to complement each other and help us come up with effective strategies and plans for the kind of development that is sought, certain adjustments need to be made in our thinking about these two sources of knowledge. Equipped with both, one will be able to do rigorous research in different areas of human endeavour.

4. MAJOR AREAS NEEDING ATTENTION

At least four principal areas of focus come to mind to be re-examined. One is education. It is clear that educational systems of many countries are failing miserably. They have fallen far short of their intended goal to provide good scientific training and have also neglected almost entirely the question of moral development. Moral education is virtually non-existent in most school systems. The kind of educational system that leads not only to the intellectual empowerment of people but also to their moral empowerment, that teaches them not only skills and techniques but also the right attitude as well as how to use the powers of the human spirit and to see the patterns from which to draw meaning. Therefore, one can imagine a vast area of research and action to incorporate moral and ethical values in our educational systems around the world.

Another area is technology. Society has to learn to make wiser choices about technology. It cannot allow itself to be a slave to technology created without regard to its consequences. It is essential to understand, from a scientific point of view, how to make decisions about technology, both about its development and its transfer. The matter of values needs to be brought to bear on technological choices. In other words, we cannot simply accept technology as a given- that whatever is developed and sold is good.

Another area of research is the area of governance. “Nations are much like human beings in that they are all similar in certain basic ways yet each also has a unique individuality and personality all of her own, coming from a certain historical background and experience. It also can be said that culture and religion are the factors that most profoundly impact on the character of a nation and on the manner in which politics and governance evolves therein”. (Inder Kumar Gujral, *The Culture of Public Service*, 261.)

The fourth area is economics. The entire field of economics has been called into question by the crisis in the environment, although the power of current economic structures remains strong and old ways persist as the standard. The present economic emphasis suggest that every human being is some kind of a machine which is programmed to maximize his or her utility and that a good world will appear in which all will prosper as everyone strives to do this. Inherent in the present economic policy is a definition of human nature, which suggests that maximizing human utility is what is expected of a human being. So one earns, spends, buys in order to satisfy the needs. These are the kinds of choices we make, and this is called being rational. If one does not do that, he or she is not being rational according to current economic theory. If one actually considers other things and allows concern for community, family or friends to prevail, it would be considered irrational. Yet every great religious tradition rejects this concept of the human being. That is not the human being seen in the tradition of Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam or the Bahá’í Faith. The human being found there is very different. It is capable of the most sublime sacrifice for the sake of the common good. Unfortunately, human beings can be molded through constant propaganda into utility machines, but their real nature, as ascribed in the books and teachings of the great spiritual traditions of humanity, is something far from that.

It is not a question of forsaking material prosperity. Material means are necessary; but, there is a need for a theory based on correct understanding of human nature through which it will be possible to bring prosperity to all of humanity, one that will not produce the sharp divisions between rich and poor which we see today.

5. INITIATIVES TAKEN

The group of people that worked together and produced the book “ *The Lab, the Temple and the Market*”, all scientists involved in development but from different religious backgrounds (Hindu, Christian, Muslim and Bahá’í), were enlightened by the initial finding of the discussion. Following their efforts to produce the book they wished to see if this discourse, that had began so successfully, could be extended to include a growing

number of participants. The idea is that if the discourse is extended to a large enough circle of development workers, there will be some individuals who are willing to go even further and undertake research that will lead to alternative development policies and strategies, which take into account the spiritual as well as the material aspects of human life.

Following on, a highly successful colloquium was held in India in November 2000 with the participation of some one hundred and fifty leaders of NGOs and representatives of government agencies with partial sponsorship of leading international aid agencies. A cogent statement of its findings was prepared and disseminated at the provincial level and among various NGOs with the hope that a coherent concept that can serve as a proposal for future actions in India will emerge. The thinking is that, if a process similar to the one which took place in India could be set in motion in twenty to thirty countries over the next few years, and if the discourse became sufficiently broad and potent, a world gathering with the participation of representatives from various international agencies and countries would become an effective instrument for development strategies that are both sustainable and effective in closing the gap between the rich and the poor, as well as bringing developed and developing countries closer together.

CONCLUSION

It has been noted that the vast development efforts over the past 50 years, although including many projects that have been regarded as successful, have not been effective in reducing the overall gap between the rich and the poor. The main reason has been identified as the failure of materialism and the lack of recognition of the influence of cultural and spiritual factors in development. The solution offered includes the recognition of the vital roles of both science and religion in development. Specifically, the necessary influence of moral and religious values in the new systems of education, technology, governance and economics are mentioned as examples. It is hoped that worldwide discourse on such fundamental change of strategies for development will bring about the necessary conditions to achieve prosperity for humankind.

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