

PERSPECTIVES

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WHY SHOULD THE UN AND IN PARTICULAR UN ENVIRONMENT ENGAGE MORE WITH FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS?

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There has traditionally been a reluctance in the United Nations (UN) system to engage with religion. With governments that range from theocracies and nations with state religions to secular states and those that are anti-religion, it is not a propitious domain for diplomacy. In addition, especially for organizations that are science-based like UN Environment, the historical antagonism of science and religion has not helped, with emotional views on both sides, and religion seen as unscientific if not dangerous. A healthier view might acknowledge their complementarity as two knowledge systems dealing with different aspects of human experience. Faith-based organizations have long been accredited to the Department of Public Information and the Economic and Social Council, but they have simply been seen as part of the NGO Major Group, and appreciated for their usefulness in project implementation. The possibility that they might have something special to contribute to UN processes has been ignored.

Environment and morality

Yet the UN has long had a legitimate interest in moral and ethical questions, as illustrated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and many other conventions and declarations, including the Stockholm and Rio Declarations on environment and development. While there is as yet no universal declaration of environmental rights, sustainability obviously requires the protection of the environment and life-support processes on this planet, and UN Environment has the mission to be the voice for the environment in the UN system. There is

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inescapably an ethical dimension to human attitudes towards the environment, including, from a purely anthropocentric perspective, the injustices done to human beings of both present and future generations resulting from environmental damage and destruction. Many environmental actions are countered by corruption, trafficking and illegal activities which are all symptoms of moral failure.

This leads to the most fundamental dimension of action for the environment, the eternal struggle between the self and others, egoism versus altruism, personal or collective benefit, national self-interest or the common well-being of all nations. The environment is part of “others” along with other people and other nations. Success in environmental action requires social cohesion and an altruistic motivation towards the common benefit of all. If UN Environment does not engage at this level, all of its policy, scientific, technical, legal and institutional efforts will ultimately be ineffective. UN Environment therefore needs to find partners in those domains that address this, which include philosophy and religion for the content, and education for the means of implementation.

The starting point is reflecting on the nature and purpose of human life. We are born with an animal nature and the potential for much more, a potential that is realized through education including material, intellectual and ethical/moral/spiritual dimensions. Without the right education, our immature ego and selfish desires dominate, and our life is driven by self-interest and physical passions. It is perfectly natural (but not inevitable) to be selfish and aggressive. For many, “you can’t change human nature”. Self-interest is expressed in today’s world as a loss of shared values and social cohesion, corruption, war, crime, dictatorships, the concentration of wealth and power, increasing xenophobia and polarization, a disregard for the needs and desires of the young and of future generations, the headlong destruction of environmental resources and life-support systems, the destabilization of the climate, and a debt-driven economic and financial system raping the planet for short-term profit. Every civilization in which these forces of disintegration become dominant has eventually collapsed.

Self-centredness in all its forms has become the ideology for self-justification behind the conservative movements of today, whether in the neoliberal economy that drives the concentration of wealth and power, political ideologies either of total individual freedom that reject any constraints or regulations in the common interest or of total control that reject all criticism or threats to centralised power, national sovereignty that leans to isolationism and self-protection behind strong borders, xenophobia that places one ethnicity or culture above all others, multinational corporations for which the right to profits overrides all other interests, and even criminal syndicates for which illegal activities are the fastest route to money and power. These ideologies forget that Adam Smith’s invisible hand of self-interest was balanced by an individual sense of moral responsibility, and assume that the larger good will somehow “naturally” emerge or trickle down from all these selfish drives, while in practice they only serve to entrench the rich and powerful.

The irony is that human beings have the capacity for much more, as the history of the rise of civilizations has repeatedly demonstrated. Education is what allows culture, science, innovation and social cohesion to develop. It cultivates all the potentials available in each individual, whether the physical capacity for athletic performance or feats of endurance, the intellectual capacity for rational thought, scientific investigation and cultural creation, the emotional capacity for altruism, empathy, solidarity and cooperation, or the spiritual capacity for love, humility, forgiveness, volition, generosity, and self-effacement into a higher collective entity. All of these dimensions of education are complementary and mutually reinforcing, and neglecting any of them can lead to undesirable outcomes.



Fundamental to all of this is the shared morality on which any society must be built, with values that contribute to social cohesion, that favour unity in diversity and leaving no one behind. Education transmits those values and ensures the sustainability of the society. Today, those values are receding. In our disordered society, the social consensus around ideals that have traditionally united and bound together a people is failing. It can no longer offer a reliable defence against a variety of self-serving, intolerant, and toxic ideologies that feed upon discontent and resentment. With a conflicted world appearing every day less sure of itself, the proponents of these destructive doctrines grow bold. Well-meaning leaders of nations and people of goodwill are left struggling to repair the fractures evident in society and powerless to prevent their spread. The effects of all this are not only to be seen in outright conflict or a collapse in order. In the distrust that pits neighbour against neighbour and severs family ties, in the antagonism of so much of what passes for social discourse, in the casualness with which appeals to ignoble human motivations are used to win power and pile up riches - in all these lie unmistakable signs that the moral force which sustains society has become gravely depleted (UHJ, 2015, para. 2).

Many people today, particularly among intellectuals, the young, and those from cultures that retain a sense of collective purpose, still hold to these values and despair at the destructive forces swirling around them, but the faltering or failure of many of the more liberal movements of the left shows that an intellectual attachment to environmental protection, human rights, solidarity, concern for the excluded and marginalized, and redistribution of wealth is not sufficient. Movements of the left are just as riven by ego, ambition and the struggle for power as those on the right.

What is missing is the level of spiritual education and transformation in each individual. Human potential comes to fruition when it is cultivated in a spirit of selfless service, without pride, with no desire to be seen as superior to anyone else, ready to accompany others in their own acts of service and thus to become part of an organically-evolving learning community. It is this dimension of education that is largely absent today in societies around the world. It is spiritual education that empowers every individual to refine their character and to contribute to an ever-advancing civilization. It is at this level that effective responsibility and accountability can be built into the institutions of society (Dahl, 2015).

Religion

This is why it is essential for UN Environment to engage today with religion. Traditionally it has been religion that has provided the multitudes with basic moral and ethical values. Religion has taught about good and evil, saints and sinners, the good values that build society, versus the greed, lust, indolence, pride, and violence that are valued in today's market society. Recent research on civilisation-building has identified religion as the main explanation for the rise of complex large-scale multi-ethnic civilizations (Turchin, 2016). Yet today, even in societies that claim to be religious, those ethical values are largely lacking, or are given lip service while the great majority pursue self-centred materialistic objectives. Where religion has been replaced by a secular ideology, the results are no better, and fear may be used to enforce common values rather than the positive internal motivation that religion can provide.

However, religion in most of its expressions today is not up to the task. In its statement to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, the Bahá'í International Community provided a detailed analysis of the challenge facing religions with respect to international efforts at the UN to address world problems. It highlighted "both the constructive role that religion can play in creating a peaceful and prosperous



global order, and the destructive impact that religious fanaticism can have on the stability and progress of the world,” and referred to the UN failure “to address religious bigotry as a major obstacle to peace and well-being.”

"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. Religion, the Bahá'í Scriptures aver, 'is the source of illumination, the cause of development and the animating impulse of all human advancement' and 'has been the basis of all civilization and progress in the history of mankind.' It is the source of meaning and hope for the vast majority of the planet's inhabitants, and it has a limitless power to inspire sacrifice, change and long-term commitment in its followers. It is, therefore, inconceivable that a peaceful and prosperous global society - a society which 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.

"At the same time, it cannot be denied that the power of religion has also been perverted to turn neighbor against neighbor. The Bahá'í Scriptures state that 'religion must be the source of fellowship, the cause of unity and the nearness of God to man. If it rouses hatred and strife, it is evident that absence of religion is preferable and an irreligious man is better than one who professes it.' So long as religious animosities are allowed to destabilize the world, it will be impossible to foster a global pattern of sustainable development ...

"Given the record of religious fanaticism, it is understandable that the United Nations has been hesitant to invite religion into its negotiations. However, the UN can no longer afford to ignore the immeasurable good that religions have done and continue to do in the world, or the salubrious, far-reaching contributions that they can make to the establishment of a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable global order. Indeed, the United Nations will only succeed in establishing such a global order to the extent that it taps into the power and vision of religion. To do so will require accepting religion not merely as a vehicle for the delivery and execution of development initiatives, but as an active partner in the conceptualization, design, implementation and evaluation of global policies and programs. The historically justified wall separating the United Nations and religions must fall to the imperatives of a world struggling toward unity and justice.

"The real onus, however, is on the religions themselves. Religious followers and, more important, religious leaders must show that they are worthy partners in the great mission of building a sustainable world civilization. To do so will require that religious leaders work conscientiously and untiringly to exorcise religious bigotry and superstition from within their faith traditions. It will necessitate that they embrace freedom of conscience for all people, including their own followers, and renounce claims to religious exclusivity and finality.

"... until the religions of the world renounce fanaticism and work whole-heartedly to eliminate it from within their own ranks, peace and prosperity will prove chimerical. Indeed, the responsibility for the plight of humanity rests, in large part, with the world's religious leaders. It is they who must raise their voices to end the hatred, exclusivity, oppression of conscience, violations of human rights, denial of equality, opposition to science, and glorification of materialism, violence and terrorism, which are perpetrated in the name of religious truth. Moreover, it is the followers of all religions who must transform their own lives and take up the mantle of sacrifice for and service to the well-being of others, and thus contribute to the realization of the long-promised reign of peace and justice on earth." (BIC 2002).



Engagement with faith-based organizations

Through engagement with faith-based organizations, UN Environment can benefit from their perspectives on the ethical transformation of society as well as their ability to communicate messages of environmental responsibility to wide audiences. At the same time, it can support their internal quest for more coherence between their behaviour and their values. There are many examples of successful engagement. In 1995, the World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) organized a World Summit on Religions and Conservation at Windsor Castle, where experts from the World Bank and UN Environment, among others, launched the discussion with religious leaders. In 1998, the World Bank convened a World Faiths and Development Dialogue at Lambeth Palace in London. The United Nations Development Program in collaboration with the Alliance of Religions and Conservation invited the major religions to prepare action plans on climate change in 2009, and on their engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. Individual religions have made powerful statements on environmental issues, such as the encyclical of Pope Francis (2015), the Islamic Declaration on Climate Change (2015) and that of the Bahá'í International Community (2015). The International Environment Forum (<https://iefworld.org>), an organization at the interface between science and ethics inspired by a faith perspective, has been accredited by the UN in the Science and Technology Major Group and contributes to conferences like the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Rio+20 and the 2015 Paris Climate Conference. At the national level, there are also faith-based and interfaith groups active in environmental issues, like Interfaith Power and Light (<http://www.interfaithpowerandlight.org/>) and GreenFaith (<http://www.greenfaith.org/>) in the USA.

UN Environment has itself collaborated sporadically in interfaith action for the environment, resulting in publications like *Ethics and Agenda 21: Moral Implications of a Global Consensus* (Brown and Quiblier, 1994), *Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity* (Posey, 1999), and *Earth and Faith: A Book of Reflection for Action* (Basset et al., 2000).

Practical reasons to engage

From the perspective of UN Environment, there are evident areas of common interest with faith-based organizations, such as Sustainable Consumption and Production, environmental education and the Sustainable Development Goals. It is already a partner in the Partnership for Education and Research about Responsible Living (PERL <http://www.livingresponsibly.org>) which is active in values-based education and has drawn on research on values-based indicators developed with faith-based organizations.

It is evident that scientific understanding of environmental issues is not sufficient to

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