

# What is Development?

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The G20 Interfaith Summit in Istanbul, 17-19 November 2015 will bring together experts on religion and the economy, religion and law and global leaders from various religious and professional backgrounds to explore ways that religious actors and communities can work together to enhance harmony and contribute to achievement of sustainable development goals.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

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Before we discuss peace, harmony, and sustainable development in the context of faith, it is necessary to shift the venue of our conversation. An inter-faith dialog cannot take place on the grounds that are taken for granted as agreed upon axioms in the secular modern world view. Key assumptions of contemporary secular modernity are that religions are individual and personal belief systems which should not intrude upon the social domain. In addition, religions are fundamentally a collection of irrational and conflicting beliefs relating to unobservables, and do not have anything useful to add to the body of knowledge currently in possession of mankind. Also, the secular modern worldview is unaware of any ideological baggage attached to modernity, and assumes that all rational human beings will automatically agree to its central propositions. Failure to agree with modernity stems from irrational and dogmatic mindsets, or simply mental deficiencies which make rational thought impossible. While post-modern western thought is aware of many serious deficiencies of modernity, it shares sufficient background assumptions of modernity to render it dangerous as a setting for a conversation about religion. To keep this essay to a reasonable length, we will ignore the diverse and complex discourse of post-modernity.

Teachings of Islam, as well as many other religions, are in violent conflict with the central propositions of secular modernity. Nonetheless, most current intellectual discourse subscribes to conventions of modernity, which is hegemonic in this respect. In order to create a neutral ground for a conversation about faith and development, it is first necessary to take away the privileged status of secular modernity, and to treat it as one of the participants in an equal conversation. This involves understanding that modernity is a religion, the latest and perhaps the most powerful invention of mankind. It is a religion in the sense that it has an explicit, clearly articulated world-view which is

very different from that provided by other religions. It also has an explicit clearly articulated set of norms, which define what is good and bad both at individual and also at the social level. Secular modernity also provides us with clearly defined ways of thinking which are socially approved, and takes a harsh view of deviations from these “rational” thoughts and beliefs.

In order to create a level playing field, we need to articulate the buried assumptions of modern intellectual discourse. As a textual device, I will capitalize the word “modernity” to indicate that I am talking about the latest religion of mankind.

## 2 THE RELIGION OF MODERNITY

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Like a fish is unaware of the water surrounding it, we are largely unaware of the underlying assumptions of the dominant discourse of Modernity which surrounds us. In order to discuss the role of religion in enhancing peace, harmony, and sustainable development, it is essential to bring out these hidden assumptions. Central to Modernity is that idea that “human reason,” understood in a special way, is all powerful. It is the only source of valid knowledge, and provides us with the best possible guidance on how to lead our lives. Because of a specialized and peculiar interpretation of reason, nearly all extant contemporary religions are incompatible with, and considered “irrational”, by Modernity. Another of the core beliefs of Modernity is the idea that reason will spread and conquer all; that all people will eventually come to believe in Modernity. The sociologist Peter Berger expressed this widely shared common belief of Modernity as follows (New York Times, 1968):

*By the twenty-first century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture.*

### 2.1 PROBLEMATIC FAILURE OF RELIGION TO DISAPPEAR

Another important element of Modernity is empiricism; respect for observable facts. Thus the fact that religion was not disappearing as expected was noted empirically: *The assumption that we live in a secularized world is false: The world today, with some exceptions, is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever.* Peter Berger, *The Desecularization of the World*, 1999

In the past, Moderns did not take religion seriously, on the assumption that it would soon disappear like the dinosaur. Now that it has become obvious that religion is not likely to disappear, the Moderns have started to take notice of it. However, the Moderns

have a very difficult time dealing with religion. Within the framework of Modern beliefs, religion is an inherently irrational collection of superstitions which have no empirical justification. From the Modern perspective, how can one understand such beliefs, and what is one to make of people who believe in irrational concepts, and behave in ways that defy reason?

To understand the problem more concretely, let us consider the structure of modern neo-classical economic theory, which assumes that all human beings seek to maximize lifetime utility of consumption. This assumption is the foundation upon which economic theory is constructed. If the economic actors do not satisfy these assumptions, then economic theory is vacuous. A society full of human beings who believe in generosity, self-sacrifice, frugality, simple lifestyles, avoidance of wasteful consumption, rewards in an afterlife, etc. cannot be analyzed by modern economists. Such people are ruled out of existence by assumption in neoclassical economics.

## 2.2 REJECTION OF THE UNSEEN

Secular modernity emerged as a European response to massive bloodshed, cruelty, intolerance, and inter-religious warfare between Catholics and various Protestant sects. The perceived hypocrisy of religious leaders led to widespread rejection of religion among European intellectuals, which had profound consequences. Nietzsche expresses the European trauma at the loss of faith in his parable of the madman who announces that “We have killed God ... How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon?”

Loss of certainties of faith led to the search for alternatives. The secular modernists created a theory of knowledge which has been expressed by Hume as follows: “If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.” Betrayed by the God who died, the Moderns vowed to trust only what they could touch or see, or figure out with their reasoning capabilities. Rejection of the unseen and unobservable is one of the core commitments of Modernity. To highlight the contrast, we quote the opening verses of the Quran:

*THIS DIVINE WRIT - let there be no doubt about it is a guidance for all the God-conscious. Who believe in the existence of that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and are constant in prayer, and spend on others out of what We provide for them as sustenance;*

Belief in the unseen is stated at the very beginning as a pre-condition for faith, which directly in conflict with a core commitment of Modernity.

### 2.3 LOSS OF MORAL VISION

As noted by many authors, the Enlightenment philosophers sought to build a new and superior morality and civilization of the basis of reason alone. However, somewhere along the road, this vision was lost and abandoned. Pangle (1992) writes as follows: “The long battle that succeeded in winning intellectual predominance for modern science was simultaneously a struggle for a new culture of universal humanity to be based on scientific reason as the only solid basis for truly common bonds among all human beings as such. The new culture was to take root in a movement of liberation from age old particularist superstitions. ... Scientific morals were to replace the old pre-scientific or traditional morals ... and religion. The very titles of some of the masterpieces of the Enlightenment reflect this great positive aspiration: Ethics demonstrated in Geometrical Order – (a long list of books) ... Modern scientists long ago ceased to think it essential to seek philosophic or theological foundations for their work. As for political science ... we have ... abandoned the claim to provide authoritative guidance in establishing the nature of the common good and the ultimate ends of collective and personal existence. ... The great attempts by the political philosophers of the Enlightenment to provide systematic, rational and generally acceptable foundations for public and private existence have proved to be inadequate.”

Julie Reuben has also described this same problem in the context of her book entitled: *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality*. She writes that that secular modernists attempted to create a higher morality on the basis of reason, but were forced to abandon this quest:

Many scholars who believed in the moral relevance of science entered university faculties and administration in the late nineteenth century. Some of these believed that the mental discipline required for scientific pursuits would produce clarity on moral questions. In addition, learning to think scientifically was held to promote moral discipline. This idea of scientific training as a form of moral education rests on an image of science as a virtuous occupation. As historian David Hollinger has shown, scientists in late nineteenth and early twentieth century appropriated religious virtues for their own legitimation. They created an ethic of science which emphasized moral values such as truthfulness, universality, self-abnegation, and presented scientists as the true representatives of these values. Scientists were endowed with characteristics such as “a passion for knowledge, love of truth, honesty, patience, simplicity of character, humility, reverence and imagination.”

Universities helped popularize the image of the moral scientist, while associating it with Christianity. Scientific training would now serve the role of character building, bringing with it scientific values of tolerance, openness, leadership, love of democracy etc. In addition to morality produced through scientific training, university leaders expected that scientific research would produce morally relevant knowledge. In particular, it was expected that biology and social sciences would produce directly relevant moral education. The proponents of science believed that USA was at the vanguard of a steadily progressing civilization, and that material, technological, and moral progress would all go together. Science was the engine of this progress, and was automatically considered a human good. Utopian literature suggested that technology would eventually solve all serious social and moral problems. Scientific research would increase wealth, health, prosperity of the nation, promote civil and social intercourse, and even bring about world peace.

Reuben, Julie A. (1996) *The making of the modern university: Intellectual transformation and the marginalization of morality*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.

### 3 RULING OUT HUMAN EXPERIENCE AS A SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE

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The Moderns adopted Science as their religion. For example, Pangle (1993) writes that “At the heart of modernity is the trust or faith in scientific reason, as the source of vast powers and authoritative guidance.” In a complex and confusing sequence of ideological shifts, the worship of science eventually led to the abandonment of human experience as a source of knowledge. This has had immensely tragic consequences which are ongoing and unrecognized.

Two fundamental mistakes in epistemology as it developed in the west led to the mistaken understanding that human experience is not a valid source of knowledge. Hacking has traced shifts in the meaning of the word “probability”. The idea of something being “probable” went from meaning that it was attested to by an authority to allowing the world itself to be such an authority, to then being associated with what we moderns think of as “evidence” (that is, not just the fact that someone says something is the case, but observing some testimony-independent facts). The loss of faith was a crucial element in these developments. Secular thinkers realized that the uniform consensus on Christianity which prevailed for centuries in Europe was no guarantee of truth, and sought more reliable standards for knowledge. Thus the use of authority, consensus and tradition as a source of knowledge was discarded, and reason and observation took its place.

### 3.1 MISUNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF SCIENCE

Reuben (1996) writes that in the 1870s, dominant Western views were that knowledge was all of one piece, embracing spiritual, moral and cognitive dimensions. All knowledge was held to illuminate the divine; thus in teaching physics, astronomy, etc., lecturers were expected to “attend only ... to the beautiful truths which are to be read in the works of God.” In particular, morality was founded in empirical laws about human behaviour, and hence could be studied and justified by observations about human nature. By 1930s this unity was shattered, with positivism driving a wedge between factual cognitive knowledge and moral/spiritual knowledge. Science was considered to be value-free and distinct from morality.

The trauma caused by loss of faith led to the Enlightenment project, a concerted effort spanning centuries, to prove the science would provide an answer to all human problems. It was taken as an article of faith that science would lead to certainty, and that eventually scientific knowledge would encompass all knowledge that was possible for human beings to achieve. The psychological necessity of justifying science against religion led to a quest to prove that science led to certainty. This had an apparently successful conclusion in the emergence of the philosophy of logical positivism, which became wildly popular for this reason. However, the philosophy proved to be defective on many grounds. This failure has not discourage believers in science from continuing to have faith in the certainty of science. One of the core elements of this misunderstanding of science is the insistence on the nominalist view of science.

Oversimplifying due to space limitations, the nominalist view holds that only observables are relevant to science. Unobservable terms, like gravity, electrons, and causal forces, derive meaning from their interpretation in terms of observables. In contrast, realists hold that science explains by positing unobservable forces and objects which explain the observable phenomenon. These unobservables exist, and that is why science explains. To be concrete, Newton’s laws work because there really is a gravitational force, even though this is not observable. Nominalists, and empiricists, hold that we cannot know anything about unobservables, and whether or not there is a gravitational force is not a question within the purview of science. The statement that gravitational force exists is equivalent to the set of its observable implications. For example, if gravity implies elliptical orbits for planets, then to say that the (unobservable) gravity exists is to say nothing more or less than saying that planets have

elliptical orbits. A detailed examination of the nominalist position and its errors, and the opposing realist philosophy of science is given by Peter Manicas in his book on the subject. In the context of our conversation, it is pertinent to note that the arguments for existence of God have the same structure as the arguments for existence of electrons and gravity, and nominalist methodology attempts to bypass this argument by saying that the existence or non-existence of unobservables does not affect scientific reasoning.

### 3.2 DENIAL OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE AS A SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE

An important goal of the secular drive to deify science was to discredit religious knowledge. If human experience is admitted as a valid source of knowledge, then my experience of God must be given weight as evidence for the existence of God. Because it was psychologically necessary for secular Moderns to deny this, it became necessary to deny the validity of human experience as a source of knowledge across the board. But this led to increasing ignorance in many domains of knowledge as collective wisdom of the ancients was discarded as unscientific superstitions.

My personal and subjective internal experience is clearly observable by myself, but is not visible to anyone else. This created a strange paradox for the logical positivists. If I acknowledge the validity of my personal experience, then consistency requires me to affirm the same for others, which leads to the acknowledgement of un-observables as a valid source of knowledge. Positivists rejected unobservables, and hence rejected the unobservable subjective experiences of others, and to maintain consistency, were forced to deny the validity of our own internal personal experience, which is tantamount to 'feigning anesthesia,' as eventually acknowledged by a leading positivist.

This feigned anesthesia led to a severe atrophy of moral faculties. Morality is based on human experience. Just as human expressions are universal, not culturally dependent, so there is universal moral sensibility, shared across cultures. We all experience revulsion at senseless violence, and feel sympathy for victims of oppression. It is on the basis of this shared experience that we can discuss complex moral problems and come to agreement on possible solutions. However, the positivists ruled out human experience as a source of knowledge, and hence lost access vital information required to validate moral judgments. The currently dominant discourse holds the objective and factual in great regard, while denigrating the subjective and emotional.

The following quote from Ayer (1936) show how ethics became meaningless to positivists:

We can now see why it is impossible to find a criterion for determining the validity of ethical judgements. It is not because they have an 'absolute' validity which is mysteriously independent of ordinary sense-experience, but because they have no objective validity whatsoever . . . They are pure expressions of feeling and as such do not come under the category of truth and falsehood. They are unverifiable for the same reason as a cry of pain or a word of command is unverifiable[as a statement] – because they do not express genuine propositions.

**The false belief that ethics and morality are meaningless concepts has had a visible impact on human development. It has led to the development of moral midgets like Oppenheimer who described the spectacular fireworks that would be generated by the Atom bomb, before explaining that all people within 2/3 miles would die<sup>1</sup>. McNamara and colleagues, graduates of the finest educational institutes in the USA, took pride in achieving high kill rates, killing more than half a million innocent civilians in Vietnam<sup>2</sup>. The complete disruption of lives of millions in Iraq and the death of more than a million civilians due to strategic considerations regarding control of oil has not led to horror or moral outrage. Obama takes pleasure in signing death-lists of people assassinated by drone strikes<sup>3</sup>, knowing full well that collateral damage from these strikes kills thousands of innocents.**

## **4 THE NATURE OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE**

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**In order to achieve some clarity, it is useful to ponder the polar opposite to the hegemonic view of human knowledge as purely and exclusively scientific. As a thought experiment, let us consider the idea that human knowledge consists solely and exclusively of our personal experiences of life. Thus each individual has knowledge of the world which is confined to her or his experience of the world. Experiential knowledge is dramatically different from scientific knowledge. Some of these differences are listed below.**

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-agony-of-atomic-genius>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.nytimes.com/1995/04/09/world/mcnamara-recalls-and-regrets-vietnam.html>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/nov/4/obama-brag-new-book-im-really-good-killing-drones/>

#### 4.1 UNIQUENESS

First, each individual is unique; even twins have vastly different life experiences. Thus no scientific law can help us in coping with different life events. Each moment of our life is unique – there has been nothing like it in the past, and nothing will be like it in the future. What kind of knowledge can help us in choosing wisely among alternatives which we face in such situations? Each choice is a potential which reaches into the future, and are ephemeral, coming into existence and dying out without ever being realized.

#### 4.2 SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Second, self-knowledge is crucial to making good decisions. But self-knowledge is not easily obtained. My interiority is known only to myself, and there are no experts or books who can guide me in more than general terms. However, my own intentions and motives and behavior may not be transparent to me. I may feel anger at others to hide my own feelings of inadequacy, and may feel embarrassed at behavior that reflects my own failings. There is a vast literature, spread across religions, and other knowledge traditions which addresses the question of how I can get to know who I am.

#### 4.3 KNOWLEDGE OF OTHERS

Third, it is in light of this self-knowledge that we learn to know others. Our knowledge is always conjectural, since we cannot know the interiority of others. At the same time, this knowledge is essential to our survival, since in we live in communities, and a huge portion of our lives and actions depends on our learning and responding to how others feel about us. Indeed, according to Polanyi, people seek to maximize their social standing, and act in ways that will win social approval.

#### 4.4 INHERENT UNCERTAINTY

Fourth: The crucial issue here is that all our knowledge, whether of ourselves or of others, is inherently uncertain, and it is impossible to achieve certainty. We must learn to live with this uncertainty as a conditions of our existence. There is tendency to deny this uncertainty, to create a false sense of security. This and many other cognitive biases have been studied intensively. These create obstacles to self-knowledge as well as our knowledge about others.

Here it is useful to note that this inherent uncertainty is also a central feature of the realist view of scientific knowledge. Since realists posit unobservable entities and causal forces to explain the observables, it is impossible to check whether or not these entities and forces exists directly. Furthermore, it is now well established that there is a severe

under-determination of theories by facts – a vast multiplicity of theories exist which fit and explain the same set of facts. This make it impossible to say about a given theory that it is true. The true/false binary is applicable to only a small fragment of the range of human knowledge.

## 5 IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACE, HARMONY, AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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The crucial point of central importance here is that the hegemonic paradigm which glorifies science as the sole source of human knowledge is of no help in finding solutions to the problems which we face collectively as human beings. We have to switch to paradigms which respect opinions over facts, since opinions provide a window into the subjectivity of human experience. Without a much deeper understanding of the human experience, it is impossible to bring peace and harmony to the planet. Contemporary social science theories – especially in political science and economics – are based on shallow caricatures of human beings. Because they fail to be grounded in human experience and realities, they contribute to harming the planet, instead of helping. To illustrate, we quote from Julie Nelson: Poisoning the Well:

### 5.1 POISONING THE WELL

This is an extended quote:

Let's begin with a thought experiment. What if the following were true?

- What if people might act out of social and other-regarding concerns, as well as reasonable self-interest in their economic lives, but are pushed by the economic theory of self-interested utility maximization to believe that it is permissible—and perhaps even appropriate--to be irresponsible, opportunistic, and selfish in when participating in markets?
- What if business leaders might pay attention to the implications of their decisions for workers, communities, the environment, and others who are affected by their firm's actions, but economic theory encourages them to believe that they should-- and in fact must--focus on getting every last dollar of profit possible?
- What if we all live in a world that is deeply interdependent, fundamentally unpredictable, and even rather dangerous, but economic theory lulls us into a false confidence that prevents us, as individuals and societies, from taking actions that might prevent dramatically harmful outcomes?

- What if the way in which economic theory has directed our attention towards self-interest and predictable "laws" and "mechanisms" has contributed in a major way to economic upheavals and human suffering, including financial crises, environmental deterioration, and a resource-starved care sector?
- What if the belief in the tenets of economic theory have become so widespread, that even those who seek a more humane and sustainable world suffer from a severe dearth of moral imagination when it comes to commerce?
- What if, in short, economic theory creates myths that strengthen the hands of the most powerful, greedy, and short-sighted economic actors, while needlessly undermining normal human ethical sensibilities and normal human aspirations for a society that is prosperous, just, and sustainable?

If one follows the thought experiment and at least momentarily accepts these premises and the characterizations of economic theory, then the conclusion that there is something ethically troubling about a profession that promotes such an economic theory is inescapable.

## 5.2 HAPPINESS INSTEAD OF WEALTH

Perhaps the first place where we need to create change is to focus on human happiness instead of maximization of wealth. Contemporary economic theory assumes that the two are interchangeable, but a massive amount of evidence has emerged that this is not the case. Easterlin discovered that increases in GNP per capita have no relationship to increased in happiness *in the long run*; there is a short run correlation, but people quickly get used to higher standards of living. The pursuit of ever higher standards of living is one of the drivers of unsustainable growth. In fact, this is futile, since higher standards of living do not buy more happiness. The failure to recognize this comes from loss of knowledge about human experience. The worlds religions agree on a stance which is opposed by Modernity here.

## 5.3 CONTENTMENT AND GENEROSITY INSTEAD OF GREED

The level of happiness does not depend on high levels of consumption. Greed damages the person who indulges in it, since he/she is never satisfied with what they get. As an Islamic tradition has it, if you give a person a mountain of gold, he will want another one, and only the dust of the grave will fill the belly of a man. True richness lies in

contentment of the heart. In opposition to modernity, religions teach about methods to achieve this contentment.

Currently, the lifestyles being pursued are using up about twice available planetary renewable resources, and are not sustainable in the long run. Impending climatic catastrophes suggest that these are not even sustainable in the short run. The only solution is to switch to simpler life-styles. Shunning luxury and leading simple life-styles is a uniformly agreed upon message of religions, in contrast with Modernity.

#### 5.4 COOPERATION INSTEAD OF COMPETITION

In many arenas, the Darwinian theory is invoked to suggest that competition leads to efficiency. In particular, the theory of firms is based on the idea of competition. This may be so in the jungle, but civilization involves leaving the jungle. Actual case studies show many harmful effects of competition where honest and efficient merchants are driven out of the market by dis-honest and unfair techniques. Cooperation is a more natural model for human beings, who have natural social tendencies. This paradigm is also strongly supported by religions, in contrast to Modernity. Peace and harmony are strongly dependent on developing cooperative tendencies among human beings

#### 5.5 THE CAPABILITIES APPROACH

It is essential to agree on a goal, in order to be able to work together. The capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen following the lead of Mahbubul Haq has the promise of providing a goal which has the potential to unite the Moderns and the traditional religions. The religions agree that all human beings are born with great potential. They provide pathways to help achieve this potential. Providing all human beings with the opportunity to achieve the potential buried inside them is the goal of social, political and economic organization. Just as every seed has the potential to grow in a natural direction, given the opportunity, so every human being has faculties, intellectual, physical, spiritual, and emotional which can grow if they are nurtured. We need to create societies which nurture capabilities. Here Modernity is not of much help because they have discarded the study of human experience. All religions have much to offer in the way of understanding human beings, and how they can grow spiritually. By encouraging living simple lifestyles, discouraging greed and envy, and practicing the golden rule, we can bring about peace, harmony and sustainable development. These goals are much more naturally accomplished within the frameworks of the traditional religions, rather than the new one of Modernity.

## 6 REFERENCES

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Pangle, Thomas L. *The ennobling of democracy: The challenge of the postmodern age*. JHU Press, 1993.