



Rethinking Prosperity

A Programme of the Science, Religion and Development Discourse Series

Organised by the Bahá'í Community of Malaysia

Saturday, 14 June 2014

9.00 am – 11.30 am

107 Jalan Ara, Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur

The narrowly materialistic worldview underpinning much of modern economic thinking has contributed to the degradation of human conduct, the disruption of families and communities, the corruption of public institutions, and the exploitation and marginalization of large segments of the population. Each crisis—be it climate, energy, food, water, disease, financial collapse—has revealed new dimensions of consumerism's burden.

The cultural forces at play are powerful and demand re-examination if we are to move forward to a culture of sustainability built on new and broader visions of human purpose and prosperity. To promote such a transformation, which implicitly challenges cultural norms and values that have promoted consumerism at all cost, underlying conceptions need to be examined and revised. The transition to sustainable consumption and production is one of the great challenges of our times, and to achieve it will require a transformation in both thought and action.

THE SCIENCE, RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE INITIATIVE – BACKGROUND

The Baha'i Community of Malaysia is currently initiating a series of discourse on the theme of Science, Religion and Development (SRD), aimed at promoting greater understanding and collaboration in bridging the role of science and religion in social transformation towards a more holistic development.

The essence of the discourse is the recognition that knowledge is the foundation of development. However, knowledge is not just material but also spiritual in nature. Thus when the methodologies of science and the insights of religion work together in a synergetic manner, it provides the essential tools for building harmonious and equitable social systems.

After decades of development initiatives many western development specialists are discovering that, the goal of a just and equitable social and economic society remains obscure and elusive. This can be attributed to the mainly materialistic assumptions and approaches that have dominated development thinking. The essential spiritual and social dimensions of life fundamental to human welfare have been kept away from the development discourse. It is this dimension of existence that enriches, ennobles and provides direction to human beings. Appreciation of this inseparable connection between material and spiritual aspects of life will give rise to a different notion of development.

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It is hoped that the series of discourse will culminate with a colloquium which serves as yet another broader initiative in the discourse, which the Baha'i Community hopes will foster greater understanding and thoughtful consultation on the complementary roles of both these vital bodies of knowledge in civilizational progress.

Objectives of the SRD Discourse

1. To create greater awareness on the need for an on-going discourse on science, religion and development.
2. To discuss ways and means of influencing thinking of decision makers in bringing about balanced development through the complementary inputs from science and religion, in the context of:
 - (a) Education;
 - (b) Business and Economic Activity;
 - (c) Technological Advancement; and
 - (d) Governance and Justice
3. To strengthen the network among interested participants and partner organizations of the continuing discourse on SRD

RETHINKING PROSPERITY – REPORT OF DISCOURSE

The discourse offered an opportunity for individuals from different levels of society to learn from each others' perspectives and experiences and to collectively advance efforts towards the building of a just and sustainable society.

The three-hour discourse was facilitated by Ms Yuet Mee Ho-Nambiar. 39 participants made up of academics, corporate personalities, inter-faith members and students attended the session. The discourse took on a very interesting discussion with various views and experiences that called on the participants to rethink the true meaning of prosperity and what it means to humanity as a whole. The following is a summary of the discussion that took place during the discourse.

A. What is Prosperity and Why the Need to Rethink Prosperity?

The general consensus among the participants was that even though prosperity refers to abundance and wealth that promote the well-being of humankind, current state of affairs reveals a culture of unfettered consumerism and materialism. In fact, the participants were of the view that the world today is experiencing a convergence of the effects of such a culture and crisis such as climate change, environmental degradation, corruption, crippling extremes of wealth and poverty or financial crisis. All these served as a reality check or a wake-up call for consumers to rethink their idea of wealth and prosperity.

This led to the question of sustainability and there was agreement that the transformation from a culture of consumerism to a culture of sustainability has gained momentum in large part through the efforts of many civil and governmental organisations. However, according to one participant such efforts are often hampered by a lack of trust and integrity. "There is a trust issue among people today and people in general have a desire to feel safe". Others also concurred that the question of trust is not an issue within a family unit and thus, there is a need to look at the inter-connectedness of humankind and find a set of common values that guides decision-making and solves problems affecting humanity as a whole.

A big shift from this discussion was the participants agreeing to a point made that today "people are focusing more on life satisfaction than satisfaction by consumption" and they want a world where they "feel free and safe to develop to the fullest potential" and "have the free will to choose". In other words they long for, "a more just, equitable, sustainable and peaceful world " as emphasised by many of the participants and "a culture of sustainability that engenders common behaviours such as trust, respect, understanding, responsibility, cooperation and all the virtues that underlie humanity's spiritual nature."

The discussions that followed led to a common understanding that for such a world to materialise, the transformation from a culture of consumerism to a culture of sustainability requires a rethinking and a re-examination of a number of underlying conceptions as outlined below.

"There is a need to look at the inter-connectedness of humankind and look for a set of common values that guides decision-making and solves problems affecting humanity as a whole"

"We want a just, equitable, sustainable and peaceful world...a culture of sustainability that engenders...all the virtues that underlie humanity's spiritual nature"

1. Human Nature

The participants agreed that one of the underlying causes of the convergence of crisis facing humanity today is that development policies for the past few decades have been and are still being built by the prevailing theories of human nature such as “human beings are born sinful” as articulated by one participant. Other prevailing theories discussed were those that contributed to the foundation of economic theories influencing decision-making policies, such as, Darwin’s theory of natural selection or Spinoza’s theory of self-preservation. As a result, the unanimous consensus was the culture of consumerism has reduced human beings to competitive, insatiable consumers of goods and objects of manipulation by the market.

“There is an urgent need to re-examine who we are and what is our purpose in life if we wish to develop a culture of sustainability...”

Hence, there was an urgent need to re-examine who we are and what our purpose in life is if we wish to develop a culture of sustainability. The human experience as emphasised by many of the participants is spiritual in nature and related faculties such as moderation, justice, love, peace, unity and service to the common good need to be harnessed to overcome man’s negative traits such as ego, greed, apathy and violence brought upon by the pervading culture of consumerism.

2. Vision of Development

Based on their conviction of a need for transformation, many of the participants agreed that more dialogues and consultations need to take place. And a forum like this could act as a catalyst for self-actualisation that the individual, the community and the institutions have a role to contribute towards a common vision.

“What is required are sustainable methods that enable and empower each individual to play his/her rightful part in making this vision a reality”

One of the interesting points that emerged from the discussion was that a culture of sustainable development should not be conceived as creating opportunities for those living in poverty to meet basic needs. The discussion brought to light that present methods of helping the needy overemphasised the importance of providing material means. They agreed that “charity is injurious unless it helps the recipients to become independent of it”. Therefore, what is required are sustainable methods that enable and empower each individual to play his or her rightful part in making this vision a reality.

3. Crisis in the Economic System

The participants felt that current models of development are focused only on the material wants and needs of society. This materialistic worldview has given rise to the misconception that material wealth is the major source of happiness and prosperity for human beings. There was agreement that such a narrow worldview has led to an economic system fully dependent on excessive consumption for a privileged few, while reinforcing exclusion, poverty and inequality, for the majority. The facilitator shared stark statistics that revealed extreme contrasts between the consumption of luxuries and the cost of basic needs. For instance basic education for the entire world would cost USD 10 billion yet USD82 billion is spent each year on cigarettes in the USA alone. Similarly, world hunger could be eradicated with USD 30 billion but the world’s military budget rose to USD1.5

“A narrow worldview had led to an economic system fully dependent on excessive consumption for a privileged few...”

trillion in 2008. As one participant pointed out, people are working harder than before but many still find it hard to earn enough to meet their basic needs. It was agreed that sustainable development is not simply about giving to the poor but creating a system that allows everyone to have opportunities to earn enough to meet their basic needs.

4. Technological Development

There was no doubt that technology was an important element in the dissemination of knowledge in achieving sustainable levels of human development. However, the participants lamented the fact that technology is not meeting the basic needs of people particularly, the underprivileged. Much of the discussion focused on how technology is being misused. In fact, there were concerns that technology is being used as ill-conceived means of destruction and exploitation. For social progress and transformation to take place, the participants expressed the need to develop technology that addresses societal needs.

“Need to develop technology that addresses societal needs – for social progress and transformation to take place..”

5. Education

This concept generated much discussion as everyone agreed that education is the key to sustainable development. The general consensus was our present education system needs to be rethought as it merely focused on imparting knowledge and generating human resources that only meet market demands. There is a need to shift our education system towards the kind of society that we wish to live in and the kind of individuals that will bring this about. A participant pointed out the education system in Finland as an example where education does not just impart relevant knowledge but also focuses on building skills and capacities that can be channelled towards the betterment of society.

“Education should not just impart relevant knowledge but also focus on building skills and capacities that can be channelled towards the betterment of society”

Thus, the general sentiments among the participants were education should be holistic with an emphasis on morality, problem solving and critical thinking. Many of the participants stressed that education should not be a political tool, but instead thoughtfully structured to answer and solve the root problems of society.

As one participant put it “we are living in the golden age of education, we have access to free education through the internet, and therefore we should not be looking at education with a narrow mindset” while another participant who shared the same view added that “our education system is based on a very pessimistic worldview; it is more about personal development rather than building capacity to serve society- It is time we look at how we can be sustainable.” The general agreement was that the government needs to engage with the people in terms of development planning particularly in restructuring the education system using a holistic approach.

6. Developing Individual Capacity

It was further discussed that the general worldview of people is based on their backgrounds and their specific needs of development. This is more evident among communities living in poverty and hardships, where development and assistance is much needed. In most cases, development planners assume the needs of these communities based on certain assumptions rather than developing capacities in individuals to carve their own path and vision.

“Each individual has a contribution to make to the construction of a more just and peaceful social order ... to contribute to the ongoing advancement of society”

It was noted that it is inadequate to conceive of sustainable consumption and production in terms of creating opportunities for those living in poverty to meet their basic needs. Rather, with the understanding that each individual has a contribution to make to the construction of a more just and peaceful social order, these processes must be arranged in a way that permits each to play his or her rightful role as a productive member of society. Within such a framework, sustainable consumption and production could be characterized as processes that provide for the material, social and spiritual needs of humanity across generations and enable all peoples to contribute to the ongoing advancement of society.

7. Science and Religion in Development

Discussions were also centred on the roles of both science and religion in development. Participants shared that not only should science moderate religion, but religion can also do the same. Based on history, when both the systems were working in harmony, great civilizations were built, economic advancement and scientific discoveries were at their peak. It was the golden periods of many nations.

“When both systems (Science and Religion) were working in harmony, great civilizations were built, economic advancement and scientific discoveries were at their peak”

Unarguably, economic activity and the strengthening of the economy have a central role to play in achieving the prosperity of a region and its people. Yet the shift towards a more just, peaceful and sustainable society will require attention to construct a harmonious dynamic between the material and non-material (or moral) dimensions of consumption and production. The latter, in particular, will be essential for laying the foundation for just and peaceful human relations; these include the generation of knowledge, the cultivation of trust and trustworthiness, eradication of racism and violence, promotion of art, beauty, science, and the capacity for collaboration and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

Closing

The programme closed with the reiteration that the discourse was a space for collective sharing and learning. Participants were encouraged to consider the application of the concepts discussed and explore further ideas that can contribute to the ongoing discourse on science, religion and development.

For further reading, participants were also presented with a document entitled Rethinking-Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture Consumerism. A statement of the Baha’i International Community, this document was presented to the 18th Session of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

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