Religion and Sustainable Development: Analysing the Connections

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ABSTRACT

Religion’s role in development has generally been viewed with suspicion, if not indifference, in scholarly and institutional concerns with development planning and policy. The last two decades, however, mark a departure, with a burgeoning interest in religion as a category of analysis in development studies. In this paper, I address the religion–sustainable development nexus specifically, and argue that religion – for both its constructive and destructive potential – must be considered in the sustainable development agenda. Specifically, I identify three ways in which religion may play an important role in enabling sustainable development – through its values, through its potential for social and ecological activism and in the realm of self-development. Copyright © 2013 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd and ERP Environment.

Introduction

The importance of religion to development practice and policy is no longer being entirely neglected. In the last decade, substantial scholarly attention has been paid to the conceptual and the methodological aspects of the religion–development nexus (Rakodi, 2012a). The journal Development brought out a special issue on religion and development in 2003, and in 2012, Development in Practice devoted two issues to this theme. A number of important books on the subject have also been published, such as Development and Religion: Theology and Practice (Clarke 2011), Religion in Development: Rewriting the Secular Script (Deneulin and Bano 2009) and The Development of Religion, the Religion of Development (Giri et al., 2004). Many development donors have also begun to overcome their latent mistrust of faith-based organizations (FBOs). In some cases, they have even shown a preference for funding the development work of FBOs over secular organizations (Tomalin, 2012). In the United States, funding to FBOs almost doubled during the tenure of President George W. Bush in four short years, from 10.5 per cent of the total aid in 2001 to 19.5 per cent in 2005 (James, 2009). While religion may still be a ‘blind spot’ (Buijs, 2004) overall in development, one can nonetheless note signs of development’s open-minded engagement with religion emerging slowly in the secular West (Tomalin, 2012).

Interestingly, critical attention to the connections between religion and sustainable development remain somewhat messier in comparison. This is partly because sustainable development itself is a ‘fuzzy concept’ (Markusen, 2003, p. 702). Framing a problem as such (or not) is a critical political issue. Tversky and Kahneman (1981) have demonstrated that the way a problem is framed and presented has consequences for the way that the issue is managed.

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and resolved. ‘Sustainable development is declared as the ultimate planning goal’ (Briassoulis, 1999, p. 889), and is seen as inherently valuable (Neuman, 2005) by a diverse range of important stakeholders such as policymakers, politicians, academics and even the general public. The call for sustainable development arguably evokes more political and policy attention than most other issues.

However, national governments that have proclaimed a commitment to sustainable development are more shy and suspicious of religion (as compared to international development), as states, including the secular states of the developing world, are careful to avoid compromising their purported secularity. To the question ‘Is religion relevant (in development)?’ Deneulin and Bano (2009, p. 14) answer in the affirmative, pointing out that the secularization thesis – that as societies modernize, religion will become irrelevant – has failed and religion’s role in humanitarian work as well as militancy makes development’s engagement with religion mandatory. For religion to have a positive role in both national and international development policy, it is important that its potential to deepen the aspirations of sustainable development be specifically clarified.

In this context, I am interested in two questions. First, why is it important that religion be ‘appreciated’, or, more to the point, ‘enabled’ to have a role in sustainable development discourse and practice? Why is sustainable development alone not enough? I have three main arguments: that religion, like sustainable development, is a difficult notion to define or a difficult institution to understand. For this reason, I argue that, where religion is problematic, it is even more important for sustainable development to engage actively and critically with it to retrieve religion’s life-enhancing potential. I also argue that religion may be eminently compatible with the science of sustainable development and thus an enabling partner for ecological protection. I also suggest that religion can have a productive influential role in determining economic sustainability. Sustainable development aims to drive economic development in a manner that is committed to ecological protection and preservation. Sustainable economic development then – problematic as it is – becomes the meta-narrative that drives sustainable development itself. The links between religion and sustainable economic development, in my view, serve as the foundation for expanding on the connections between religion and sustainable development as a whole.

My second question is what sorts of role religion may play in sustainable development. I envision three roles: through some important values that religion can offer, through its potential for activism and finally in the more personal realm of self-development. The self may be regarded as the smallest unit of the function of sustainability; seen this way, it then also becomes the very core of the function of sustainability. For large numbers of the human population worldwide, the metaphysical authority on self-development would come from religion.

Given the predominant role that organized religion plays in global politics and international relations, I specifically refer to organized religion in references to the role of religion in development. However this reference is far from exclusionary of agnostics, atheists and others. Gerald Larson (1995, p. 280) argues for an understanding of ‘religion’ as an essentially anthropological construct, comparable with concepts such as ‘culture’, ‘language’ and ‘society’. From this standpoint, he argues that while one might choose to not participate in one or any religion, ‘one does not have an option not to be religious, any more than a normal human being does not have an option not to have a culture, or a language or a kinship identity’. He clarifies that this does not mean one has to proclaim sympathy for a particular worldview; on the contrary, one may even express hostility.

I do not, however, treat religion uncritically as a panacea for all that ails sustainable development. Carole Rakodi (2012b) notes that, where religion is viewed sympathetically in development, it is often treated as the ‘missing ingredient’. However, the fact is that religion’s presence as well as absence may present both possibilities and problems in development, for this is highly dependent on the local context. Thus I take the view that the most productive approach for sustainable development practitioners and policymakers is to cultivate an openness to engage critically and fairly with religion, with due literacy in religion, rather than treating it as wholly relevant or irrelevant.

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**Sustainable Development and Religion: Marriage of Two Trojan-Horse Concepts?**

cScholarly concerns with ‘sustainable development’ and with ‘religion’ are strikingly similar. The primary anxiety is that it is impossible to neatly capture the essence, aims and methods of both notions. Davison (2001) argues that, while sustainable development’s conceptual integration of the environment and the economy might have been a ‘remarkable
triumph for the environmental movement’, the language of sustainable development has essentially ‘enabled a fundamental redefinition of these concerns’ (Davison, 2001, p. 12). The universalist scope of the notion, and its use to support a variety of agendas, has in fact become its Achilles heel (Adams, 1993). Sustainability’s carrying power comes from the sense of efficiency that it conveys, and even prior to the release of the Brundtland report Winner lamented (1986, p. 54)

‘Because the idea of efficiency attracts a wide consensus, it is sometimes used as a conceptual Trojan horse by those who have more challenging political agendas they hope to smuggle in. But victories won in this way are in other respects great losses. For they affirm in our words and in our methodologies that there are certain human ends that no longer dare to be spoken in public. Lingering in that stuffy Trojan horse too long, even soldiers of virtue eventually suffocate.’

Likewise, Taylor (2007, p. 864) describes the task of defining religion as ‘exceedingly messy’. It is as impossible to arrive at a consensus on the understanding of religion, even within religions and denominations, as it is to come to a shared view of sustainable development. This flexibility of definition is even important for these concepts; Davison (2001) argues that sustainable development is and should be contestable. Noy (2009) notes that practitioners of the same religion are likely to have different worldviews, depending on the local context. Equally, there are empirical studies that conclude that people’s understandings of spirituality and religion have so many overlaps that differentiating between the two concepts may often be irrelevant (Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Furthermore, Salemink’s (2004, p. 128) analysis of the aims of ‘religion’ and ‘development’ shows so many similarities in their potential for enabling human flourishing as well as in their ‘self-righteousness and rigidity in thinking’ that he concludes that the difference between these two concepts may be miniscule.

Religion’s interest in sustainable development has been strong from the concept’s very beginnings. As early as 1988, religious organizations were using the language of sustainability, based on the Brundtland definition. For example, the Uniting Church, Synod of Western Australia, in its 1988 Statement to the Nation (which was developed further in its 1991 Rights of Nature and Future Generations), made a reference to sustainable development. They reaffirmed this a decade later (Synod of Western Australia, 2001, p. 4, para. 2):

‘We affirm our belief that the natural world is God’s creation; good in God’s eyes, good in itself, and good in sustaining human life. Recognising the vulnerability of the life and resources of creation, we will work to promote the responsible management, use and occupation of the earth by human societies. We will seek to identify and challenge all structures and attitudes, which perpetuate and compound the destruction of creation.’

Sustainable development, based as it is on an overtly moral call, is most likely of all development concepts to be empirically open and responsive to collaboration with religion. The question that arises when Brundtland is considered is fundamentally related to religion: wherein lies the motivation to be sustainable? Any society and its people, unless they are in some way morally well disposed to humankind and the environment, run the risk of becoming overwhelmed by a call for a complex response such as the Brundtland proposal. Religion is undoubtedly one of the major global authorities and arbiters of morality, and dialogue with sustainable development is not only possible but necessary to enable the humanitarian and ecological work that preoccupies both equally. In the sections below, I begin addressing the three main questions of this paper. I first address why sustainable development alone is not enough and argue that religion must be appreciated as one of its important partners to provide the moral force that it needs.

Is Sustainable Development Enough?

The first major concern of this paper – ‘appreciating’ religion’s role in sustainable development – is a fraught one and we must openly face long-standing, and often justifiable, concerns about religions’ complicity in environmental degradation and destruction. Starting with Lyn White’s little essay in 1967, Christianity has borne the guilt for the ecological destruction of the planet. White held that the Christian interpretation of Genesis 1, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth’ sanctioned destructive dominance of the planet and engendered the
artificial separation of humans from nature. So too, Christianity’s unsympathetic views on birth control have been held significantly responsible for the HIV/AIDS pandemic and for limiting women’s rights.

Likewise, Hinduism is often seen in India as complicit in legitimizing social repression through the caste system (Ilaiah, 1996). Agarwal (2000) argues that Hinduism’s focus on self-realization means that the interconnections of the Hindu self with the greater environment are weak, which is further exacerbated by the contemporary materialistic society. Hinduism has also been misappropriated for sanctioning untramelled consumption. For example, eminent writer Jug Suraiya (2007) advises his middle-class readers to go on a ‘gilt trip’, rather than a ‘guilt trip’ in the weeks leading up to Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights. He insists that austerity is the core belief of Semitic religions; he writes (2007), ‘In the Indian tradition, on the contrary, far from being a sin, wealth is a goddess, Lakshmi, to be rejoiced in and not shunned’. He reassures his readers that they are only doing their ‘bit for Lakshmi’ by indulging in gross consumerism.

As for Islam, it is oftentimes seen, particularly in the popular imagination, as incompatible with development altogether because of the repression of women in many Islamic cultures. N. H. Ammar points that most of the socio-legal discussion on Islam revolves around the 34th Koranic verse (Ayah) of the Al-Nisa (Surah) chapter on the treatment of women, which apparently gives divine sanction to some of the worst forms of repression of women. It is indeed a concern that religion in some instances may take away women’s hard-won rights, or obstruct progress towards them, which would be an enormous loss altogether for sustainable development. Countries that do not invest sufficiently in their women undermine the sustainable development of their nation as a whole (OECD, 2008).

There is valid concern that the fundamentalism associated with political Islam and other extremist religious groups can cause poverty, civic strife, terrorism and a threat to basic human rights (Kauffman, 2010). These are all important and serious charges, and it is too easy to dismiss these concerns against religion by resorting to charges of essentialism, for religion clearly can and does have destructive impacts. The main issue, then, is not denying or countering these claims but consistently maintaining critical engagement with religion. This requires exploring the possibilities for religion to be reinterpreted as an enabling and empowering force in people’s lives, by refreshing some of the latent tenets of religion in a contemporaneous manner, such as what Gandhi’s neo-Hinduism did for Hinduism (Giri, 2004).

Moreover, if the charges above are all indeed true, then the ‘development crisis’ is in many ways intimately interwoven with religion, and to decouple environmental and social problems from religion would be a retrogressive step for sustainable development. Religion, then, is a critical category of analysis in articulating and implementing development solutions, and with its massive grassroots presence must, in fact, be invited to assist in enabling sustainable development. Eric Kauffman (2010), in his book Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth?, makes a strong case that the proportions of the religious populations even in the secular West may soon outstrip the secular citizens and that engagement with religion at all levels of international policy is thus imperative. Lynn White (1967) argued that, if the cause of environmental problems lies in religious ideologies, then the solutions must rise from the same source.

Furthermore, selective institutionalization of religious messages can also cause the sustainability problem. Central to the worship of Lakshmi in Hinduism, for instance, is the emphasis on enlightened spending and experience of materialism in a manner that assists self-realization, which is consistent with sustainable consumption (Narayanan, 2010). The Book of Genesis, a sacred text for Christians and Jews alike, also advances the doctrine of ‘stewardship’, which is a theological belief that humans are responsible for the world, and should take care of it. It can have political implications, as in Christian Democracy and the Christian call to ‘live the Social Gospel’. Christian influence in political and practical affairs may be inspired to ‘serve the garden in which we have been placed’ (Genesis 2:15). In a particular global context, however, these messages run the risk of becoming narrowly interpreted and discriminatively adopted, thus leading to problems instead of solutions.

Equally, there are resources within sustainability that, intelligently applied, can empower religion to be a better partner in enabling sustainable development. Many environmental thinkers have long believed that a religious or a spiritual view of nature needs to be underpinned by a scientific or a practical view of nature, and have established a strong link between scientific understanding, and morality and care for ecosystems (Palmer, 1998; Kinsley, 1995). Michael Polanyi (1958), in fact, proposed that deeper scientific understanding of the universe actually enhances creative ways of relating to nature and the greater cosmos; a deepened understanding completely alters our perception, and makes it impossible to view the world, or ourselves, as we did before. Robert Trigg argues (1998, p. 71) ‘Science may
tell us "how" and religion "why". Together, science and religion may inspire more strongly sustainability activism and commitment than separately.

James Lovelock uses a framework similar to Polanyi’s theory to promote a sacred awareness as well as a scientific awareness of the notion of the Earth as a living organism, Gaia, named after the ancient Greek earth goddess. Lovelock (2006) admits that Gaia is conceptually difficult to comprehend, particularly for pure scientists; he describes Gaia as a ‘physiological system because it appears to have the unconscious goal of regulating the climate and the chemistry at a comfortable state for life’. However, he points out that it nevertheless ‘operates within a set of bounds or constraints’ and that recognizing these limits is crucial for an intuitive understanding of the Gaia hypothesis (Lovelock, 2006, p. 26). While Lovelock had not specifically intended that his religious name for a fundamentally scientific theory would widely awaken religious and spiritual consciousness for environmental and earth care, the Gaia concept’s carrying power came precisely from the fact that it developed into a quasi-religious narrative (Primavesi, 1998; Lovelock, 1995).

Concerns for ecology are intimately interwoven with the nature of economic development. Capitalist forms of economic development that rely on ecological destruction make even the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) a double-edged sword. Salemink (2004) points out that, while no sane person would dispute the mandate of the MDGs per se, their achievement – through capitalist growth – would be worrisome, as it allows such growth, with its accompanying legacies of ecological destruction and social erosion, to permeate the furthest reaches of the planet. The need for a moral rationale to define economic development has never been as great as it is now.

Sfeir-Younis (2001) puts forth five arguments as to why it is imperative for economists to begin considering religion and spirituality while planning economic development. First, individuals and societies are increasingly demanding that such a perspective be considered in economic policy development, because they are disillusioned with the adverse impacts of existing economic policies, such as rising poverty, a widening gender-divide, ecological degradation, and war and violence. Second, contemporary economists are dealing with challenges that are multidisciplinary in nature, often with ethical and moral nuances. Third, economic policies are not ‘neutral’ to issues such as social justice, equity and governance, and therefore one cannot dismiss the strong influence they exert on these aspects of healthy sustainable development. Fourth, he points out that civil society – mostly represented by non-governmental organizations, spiritual and religious movements, businesses and academia – has taken a lead in attempting to ‘humanize’ economics: it’s time to refocus again on ‘human being’, he says, rather than ‘human knowing’, ‘human wanting’ or ‘human doing’. Last, he emphasizes, economics must become ‘the science of the collective’ in a globalized world. This is because most challenges faced by individuals have collective and global solutions, brought on by the ‘experience of interconnectedness’ of globalization.

Mahatma Gandhi pondered at length the question (Iyer, 1990, p. 94) ‘does economic progress clash with real progress?’. If economic development means accumulation of wealth and profit without limit, then, Gandhi believed, ‘economic progress… is antagonistic to real progress’ (Iyer, 1990, p. 97). This is because, as Herman Daly put it, continual economic growth on a planet with finite resources is an ‘impossibility theorem’. Even two decades ago, the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) had shown that further economic growth is not required for eliminating poverty deprivation; any growth now would only be to augment the wealth of the developed classes. In fact, these reports show that the worst instances of poverty can be addressed through low rates of economic production (de Fonseca et al., 1993).

Traditional religious texts have pointed out that what may now be understood as sustainable economic growth is not consonant with no economic activity, for this is needed to raise the poor out of inhumane living conditions.1 However, the promise of capitalism to remove poverty has not been wholly or even substantially realized. If economics was not compatible with principles of social justice and equality, then Gandhi did not consider it ‘true’ economics. He wrote (1921)

1In the Dhammapada (No. 203), for instance, the Buddha said ‘one of the causes of immorality and crimes is poverty [dāliddiya]… rulers should find ways to raise the economic standard of the people’ (Mendis, 1994, p. 198). However, in Dhammapada No. 204, the Buddha also said ‘Health is the highest gain, contentment is the greatest wealth’ (Mendis, 1994, p. 198). Implicit in this is the view that human welfare must be measured in material and physical terms, as well as spiritual terms. Jesus quotes from the Old Testament: ‘Man doth not live by bread alone’ (Deuteronomy 8:3).
‘True economics never militates against the highest ethical standard just as all true ethics, to be worth its name, must at the same time be also good economics... true economics stands for social justice; it promotes the good of all equally, including the weakest, and is indispensable for decent life.’

The arguments that there are intellectual and scientific resources within religion that can significantly assist the aim of sustainable economic development – that, in fact, the two may even be indistinguishable in important respects – leads to a consideration of the actual resources that religion brings and roles that it can play in sustainable development. I identify three such possibilities – in values, in activist roles and in enabling self-development.

**Three Roles for Religion in Sustainable Development**

What are the sorts of role that religion might play in sustainable development in the future? Broadly, it is possible to conceive of three possibilities for religion in development and development policy – one, that it plays no role and that this problematic Pandora’s box is self-consciously and deliberatively closed in favour of a rigidly secularist understanding of development; two, it plays a highly influential and central role in defining development and progress, or three, it adopts a middle path and plays some role in development (Lunn, 2009). I offer that religion on its own can offer no comprehensive authority on ecologically and politically just and equitable sustainable development; it may, however, play a vital role in animating human lives and fulfilling human purpose, which might be ultimately critical in enabling an authentic sustainable development.

Religion plays an influential role in development in three ways. Firstly, religion offers a wealth of universal values, which lends itself to interpretation and practice by individual seekers and practitioners, both religious and secular, to inform their sustainability practice. Govert Buijs (2004) identifies the Christian notion of caritas as one vital way for religion to fill development’s ‘blind spot’ and calls for the restoration of the notion as a ‘non-utopian source of inspiration for the alleviation of human suffering’. I, in a similar way, identify the understanding and practice of the Hindu dharma or notion of ‘duty’ or ‘ethics’ or the ‘right means’ as the potential for the most profitable connections between Hindu religion and sustainable development to be made. I propose the notion of dharmic sustainability that would be based on the complementary strengths of science and religion. Seen this way, if dharma is the value, then sustainability becomes the strategy by which to live and realize the value. The Islamic tenet of interest as sin was influential in inspiring the creation of the early microfinance institutions, which do charge interest, albeit at low rates.

There are important resources within religious traditions that can help define morally informed and yet practical economic growth for sustainable development. The Hindu notion of the purusharthas reconceptualizes sustainable consumption by acknowledging the human tendency to want and directing ways for material and sensuous consumption to be in accordance with the rules of dharma or duty (Narayanan, 2010). The stage of dharma may be where the most productive partnerships between Hindu religion and sustainable development may be realized. The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka, founded by A. T. Ariyaratne in 1958, draws its principles from the lessons of the Buddha (Chowdhry, 2005). The movement foregrounds one of Buddhism’s primary lessons, that service is an important economic resource for the development of all sections of the society, and cannot be treated as a commodity. Central to the movement’s ethics is the principle of sharing, where the participants share themselves with the needy and the deprived. Shramadana means ‘giving of one’s time and labour as a gift’ (Chowdhry, 2005, p. 231).

The Islamic notion of interest as sin has revolutionized the system of banking for the poor by significantly inspiring the microfinance institution. Admittedly, the noble intentions of the early microfinance institutions have moved far away into a highly commercialized system, which oftentimes charges interest rates now comparable with standard banks. This only emphasizes to me the vital importance of the religious inspiration for microfinance being kept in sharp focus, in order to deliver the full promise and potential of the banks. All religions are consistent in maintaining that material accumulation is the way to inner turmoil rather than peace, constant with the findings of contemporary political theorists (Hamilton and Denniss, 2005). Jesus Christ said ‘How hardly shall they that have
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riches enter into the Kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through a needle’s eye than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God’ (Luke 17: 18–23). Mahatma Gandhi called Jesus ‘the greatest economist of his time’ (Iyer, 1990, p. 95).

These values, then, are useful for religion’s second role, in influencing ecological and social activism, which may be quasi-religious nature, as seen in the famous Chipko movement of the 1980s in India, the discourses around ‘sacred groves in India’ or the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka or through the rising numbers of FBOs etc. There are also exciting possibilities for multi-religious and collaborative religious participation in the sustainability agenda, with the potential to tap into the demography of their combined grassroots influence. Noy (2009) makes the pertinent observation that there is typically not much dissonance between the development aims and ideals of two different faith traditions. Rather, there is more likely to be disagreement within the same religious tradition, for compatibility in the field is based on liberal or conservative affiliations of the practitioners rather than religion or denomination. In the same study, Noy (2009) also points out that there is generally no difference between secular and religious visions of what constitutes development.

There is need, however, for secular practitioners and policymakers of sustainable development to be aware that their own worldviews are likely to be highly shaped by religion, whether or not they themselves claim such affiliation. Buijs (2004, p. 104) calls ‘the Western notion of progress...a secularized and technicized translation of the Christian longing for a new heaven and a new earth’ and says that acknowledging this undeniably makes development ‘a missionary practice’. Development’s roots in Christianity are also an important reason why development donors are also more likely to finance Christian FBOs (Rakodi, 2012b), because they see their development aims and methods as compatible. It is probable that this is why Western models of development often fail in non-Western contexts, since an imposition of alien development practices that do not sync with the local religious context will not have the resonances of an indigenously evolved rationale and methodology despite the fact that many of the fundamental aims might be similar. Thus, there is a danger of becoming a ‘secularized missionary’ instead, which is viewed as ‘reprobate’ (Buijs, 2004, p. 104). And yet, this zealousness for the capacity to persevere and fight cynicism and despair is surely important for sustainability too. The important thing for development practitioners is to bring awareness – including self-awareness as related to one’s ‘religious self’ – to policymaking and practice.

The third important role that I see for religion and development is in the more personal realm of self-development. The human self, and the development of the self, has become a source of preoccupation for many development theorists such as Fritjof Capra, Ben Okri, Vandana Shiva and Joanna Macy, including also economists such as Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum and Wolfgang Sachs. If the ecological crisis may be viewed as fundamentally a spiritual crisis (Berry, 1999), then the self-development of the individual human self becomes the crux of global sustainability. Anthropocentric sustainability emergencies such as climatic change and the potential annihilation of the planet itself, as well as growing social inequities, point centrally to the role of the individual self in engendering these crises. A weak sense of self leads to the acceptance of choices that may well be dishonourable, irrational or immoral, but the need for the weak self to gain social or political acceptance is stronger than the will to make and abide by the right choice (De Botton, 2000). Australian political philosopher Clive Hamilton (2008, p. xii) writes

‘The source for the kind of transformation that is now needed lies beyond the cultural, political and social philosophies that have formed the bedrock of progressive thought. We need to look to religion or metaphysics – ideas about knowing and being that are beyond the psychological and social structures that condition everyday experience – to discover what unites us all in our humanity.’

For a large proportion of the world’s populations, such metaphysical authority would come from religion, and hence there is need for religion, through civic communities and religious representatives, to be actively involved in interpreting the notions of ‘being’ and the ‘self’ in ways that promote social, economic and ecological justice. Ananta Kumar Giri (2004) argues that self-development is the sustained fruit of dialogical reflections between philosophy and religion: in other words, between Athens and Jerusalem. Can we then envisage conversations on a broader development and methods for achieving good development, he asks, between Geneva and the Vatican, between Varanasi and Washington? Sustainable development, precisely for its much lamented flexible definition, is best placed to explore such conceptually and methodologically radical development.
Conclusions

The importance of religion in determining the nature of human lives – in both constructive and destructive ways – and the need therefore for sustainable development to engage with religion has been the focus of my paper. I have noted that both ‘religion’ and ‘sustainable development’ are loosely defined concepts, and their flexibility can render them vulnerable to a variety of unsustainable interpretations; yet they are of considerable importance to each other in their efforts to achieve their shared goals of humanitarian welfare and ecological preservation. Furthermore, their latent adaptability is also their strength in making them useful in a variety of contexts.

I identified three ways in which religion may play a role in sustainable development – through the values it offers, through its potential for ecological, social and political activism (based on those values) and through its capacity to enable self-development. As the International Environment Forum (2001) pointed out, ‘Values, or the application of spiritual principles, have been the missing ingredient in most past approaches to sustainable development. … The exciting thing about addressing sustainability at the level of values is the potential to create self-generating human systems building a more sustainable and thus ever-advancing civilization’.

There are important considerations that sustainable development policymakers and religious leaders must attend to. These include restraint in adopting a proselytizing approach, essentializing rigid religious stances or resorting to ‘development fundamentalism’ or ‘aggressive, uncompromising implementation in practice’ (Salemink, 2004, p. 128). Dialogue and open-mindedness from both partners are essential to democratic and equitable practice and policy. Development can equally offer religion an opportunity to introspectively revisit some of its claims and practices, and religion has generally been shown to be responsive to changes in the socio-political climate (Deneulin and Bano, 2009). It is possible to conclude that sustainable development as practice and religion as belief system are intertwined and must be addressed together.

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