



## Social Sustainability as a Challenge in Sciences and Technological Advancement: On Man in the Environment

Alabi T.O

General Studies Department  
Federal University of Technology,  
Minna Niger State.

### Abstract

This paper explores current and potential relationships between religious belief, global ethics and social sustainability. Achieving sustainability (theoretical and active) must begin to take into account that the majority of the world's populations are adherents to a religious belief of some kind. All major religions contain ideas about the responsibilities of the individual toward the environment and toward other people, and the agendas for achieving sustainability may fruitfully draw on these ideas, but it is now commonly understood that the environment is linked with social and economic factors, and to achieve overall sustainability we must explore the interplay between each of these three aspects called "triple bottom line". As a generalization theory concerned with religious belief the main proponent of this paper thus comparing religion as a market place or "sacred canopy" conclusively have it that ideas about what is right and desirable and thus all are essentially visionary, optimistic distinction and progressive when we talk or speak an action "ethic" rather than a series of "right" on the basic principle for collective moral action for future research a large comparative study could be undertaken with attention to multiple religious decrees and policy frameworks from other countries.

### Introduction

This paper explores current and potential relationships between religious belief, global ethics and social sustainability. Achieving sustainability (theoretical and active) must begin to take into account that the majority of the world's populations are adherents of a religious belief of some kind. All major religions contain ideas about the responsibilities of the individual toward the environment and toward other people, and agendas for achieving sustainability may fruitfully draw on these ideals. It is not our intention to survey each of the world's religions to look for material that ties in with sustainability discourse, in part because this has been done, and also because it is a task of considerable scope and this paper is intended as a preliminary foray into the field. In this instance, it will be instructive to look at the nature of religious belief as a whole (inasmuch as it can be discussed as a unity) and the possible contribution of religion to knowledge about social sustainability. For this reason, we will be examining the arena of 'global' or 'universal' ethics – that is, attempts to standardize and codify commonly held ideas about what constitute good and moral behavior into single declarations that suit all participants.

There is often a religious basis for universal ethics, meaning that much of the work of finding common ground in the world's religious traditions has already been undertaken; by adherents to those religions. The notions of universal ethics is not a new phenomenon. It might be said that Max Erhmann (author of the well-known *Desiderata*, formerly thought to have been found on a seventeenth-century church wall) invented the modern incarnation of the idea, as the *Desiderata* is truly pan-religious in tone ("Therefore be at peace with God,

whatever you perceive him to be...'). Universal ethics is now a rapidly expanding field of activity; there are now numerous global and local institutes and other organizations whose aim is to develop and promote codes of ethical Behaviors that are based held, are widespread in the global sense. Some proponents of global ethics focus on environmental ethics, others on business ethics, and some on social values; thus, the basic concerns of global ethicists are very much in line with the concerns of those who study triple bottom line sustainability.

Sustainability discourse began with concern over increasing levels of environmental degradation, but it is now commonly understood that the environment is linked with social and economic factors, and that in order to achieve overall sustainability we must explore the interplay between each of these three aspects of the so-called triple bottom line. This exploration has proved far easier in theories than to put into practice, and various commentators have noted that the 'social' has a habit of falling off the agenda in sustainability paper, as there is still no clear picture of how it is to be monitored within a triple bottom line (Elkington 1999: 75). For the purposes of this paper, the definition of social sustainability is: *the discourse of a better society and how it might be achieved*. Here it will be useful to separate 'the social' as an element from environmental notions, in order to examine it more closely. This can be done by examining the way in which the two discourses approach the term 'sustainability'. In its most literal sense, the term 'sustainability' refers to the extent to which an object, environment or condition can remain unchanged. In much environmental sustainability discourse, it is recognized that, while no natural system can be entirely without change, it is both possible and desirable to minimize destructive change and degradation by limiting the impact of human action on the environment. Unless we limit our own level of environmental destruction, it will significantly compromise the needs of future generation's Social sustainability discourse approaches the term in an entirely different way: it is not about sustaining a current natural situation, and cannot therefore progress with the intention of limiting human action, because human action is the basis of society.

Social sustainability discourse begins with the basic premise that our current social mode of action is flawed, witnessed by large imbalances in the distribution of wealth and power and by the extent of social exclusion. Our notion of social sustainability is currently determined by our perception of its absence; indeed, if we lived in a sustainable society, we would probably have no need for the concept of one. It is not; therefore, the goal of work toward social sustainability to maintain our current society just as it is, but to alter it so that it may become worth sustaining, and so that it takes on a form that may be sustained. We are immediately faced with the difficulty of *imagining a positive situation that does not currently exist, in order to attempt to find solutions for current and everyday problems*. Such images of idealized social situations take on many forms: policy documents, utopian images and texts, religious decrees (one might argue that the Ten Commandments are constructions or models for a perfect society), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and declarations of global ethics such as the one developed by the Parliament of the World's Religions.

By drawing global ethics into the paper of social sustainability we not only increase our understanding of what a sustainable society may be, but also how our own vision of sustainability links with those of others around the globe. Basic results of the document comparison are given at the end of this paper. These simply show that there is much in common between religious and ethical notions of a perfect society and the image of a better society found in social sustainability policy frameworks. The major conclusion is not so much that the similarities are present, but that the comparative methodology is viable, and

that future work on social sustainability can usefully precede by drawing in ideas and visions from religious/ethical declarations.

### **Overview on Sustainability, Sociology and Religion**

The link between environmental sustainability and religious traditions is well established and there have been significant publications in this area in the last decade, particularly in the US (*Encyclopedia of religion and nature* 2005; Harvard University Press's Religions and World Ecology series, 1997-2004) and the work of the Religion and Ecology group at the American Academy of Religion. This paper does not attempt to add substantially to that discourse, but it will be useful nonetheless to summarize the field briefly. Broadly speaking, academic work on sustainability and religion can be categorized as follows:

- *Condemnation of religion for promoting environmental damage:*  
Scholars such as Merchant (*The death of nature*, 1980) and Shepard (*Nature and madness*, 1982) have attacked organized religion, particularly Christianity, for fostering environmentally destructive attitudes.
- *Green elements in traditional religions:*  
Here, religions are 'mined' for their potential contributions to the green Movement. Examples include the *Encyclopedia of religion and nature* Already cited. The work of the Harvard Group in particular focused on the Need 'to establish a common ground among diverse religious cultures for Environmentally sustainable societies' (italics mine). This is comparable With the intentions of the Parliament of the World's Religions in Establishing a common code of global ethics. The focus of some such work In this field is on what religions could achieve in this field if they were Reformed (Tucker 2003). Indigenous beliefs are often studied 'in this way (Deloria 1994).
- *Global environmental spiritualism:*  
In this category is work that perceives a link between awareness of the Global environment and holistic/pan-religious spiritual beliefs. The focus Here is on the perception of nature as a deity (Gaia, etc) and on human Awareness of the deity as being of ultimate benefit to our environmental Attitudes (i.e. Deudney 1995).

While the contribution – real and potential – of religious traditions to environmental sustainability is well established, the picture is less clear when we examine religion and social sustainability. Search on the subject of sustainability and religion yields very little of relevance to the social aspect, and points in most cases to material on environmentalism. Searches on major databases such as Academic and Science Direct also reveal that the link between social sustainability and spirituality is not well established. As the link is not an altogether unlikely one, the relative lack of material on the topic raises the question of why the topic has not been broached before.

In part, this is a question of terminology: few studies on the sociology of religion make any reference to 'sustainability', but nonetheless it is generally understood that religion is a social force capable of either sustaining a society or catalyzing change ( Roberts 1990: 57). More importantly, the lack of material on religion and social sustainability is a product of the problematic relationship between religion and the social sciences in western thought. Until relatively recently, religious sociology has been a field characterized by a defensive (and perhaps Symbiotic) relationship between sociologists and religious apologists, both aiming to achieve hegemony over the moral basis for collective human life (Kurst 1995:6). It has been

argued that sociology and psychology – the scientific and systematic study of collective and individual human action developed and promoted by thinkers such as Comte, Marx, Freud, Durkheim and Weber – were born out of the broad social and political movement away from the arbitrary authority of the church in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and sought as its first objective to replace clerical authority with rational science. Many of the early proponents – Comte, Marx and Engels in particular – predicted that rational social science would replace religion as the dominant way of understanding and governing human action (Kurst 1995: 5-8). During the 1960s and 70s it must have seemed as though this process of replacement – later dubbed ‘secularization’ – was near completion. Secularization, in Hammond’s words, is the idea that ‘society moves from some sacred condition to successively secular conditions in which the sacred evermore recedes’. Both secular sociologists (Berger 1967; Luckmann 1967;

Wilson 1966) and theologians (Cox 1965; MacQuarie 1967) commented on the general decline in the influence of the Christian church in public affairs in terms of this process of Secularization and various models were put forward as to its operations. The secularization debate continues in the twenty-first century, as an extension of the situation just described. Peter Berger, a strong proponent of the theory in the 1960s, has partially retracted his original position and now argues secularity is by no means inevitable, and that in fact European secularity needs to be explained by sociology precisely because it is a historical and global anomaly (Berger 1999).

Others, such as Stark (1999), have pronounced the secularization theory completely dead, while others (Bruce 2001a, 2001b) still see secularization at work as a consequence of modernization. While the sociology of religion is no longer the highly secular field of study it once was, secularization remains one of its major foci, and a great amount of intellectual energy is still expended arguing its finer points. One consequence of this is that other discourses of society – in this instance, social sustainability – have not properly engaged with religious belief *because social sustainability is not obviously relevant to secularization*.

Social sustainability as a concept is primarily a child of the social sciences and is most often discussed in social theory texts and social policy frameworks. In most cases where religion is mentioned, it is simply to note that human beings have the right to hold a religious belief without fear of persecution, a notion taken from the United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It will argued that social sustainability – that is, the discourse of a better society and how it might be achieved – does not and should not seek to explain religious belief in sociological terms, but instead to assume that religious belief in many forms is a given in global society, and work toward goals of sustainable social justice with an understanding of religious belief as a potential positive contributor to these aims. (I am not dwelling here on the obvious negative contributions of religious adherents to sustainability or world security, although a detailed research project would doubtless encounter and deal with these. The purpose here is to develop the initial link between sustainability and global ethics.)

### **Comparative religion in the global spiritual marketplace**

One of the most widely known sociological models of religion is that developed by Peter L Berger 1998 and generally called ‘the sacred canopy’. In *The sacred canopy: elements of a sociological theory of religion*, Berger outlines that religion is the establishment, through human activity, of an all-embracing sacred order that ‘legitimizes social institutions by ...

locating them within a sacred frame of reference' (Berger 1967: 33). Berger discusses the process by which such a sacred order (in this case, the Christian order) is constructed, and how it is perpetuated, and how it becomes a part of the internal life world of individuals, arguing for interpersonal and intergenerational transmission of ideas as the most important mechanism for this internalization:

The reality of the Christian world depends upon the presence of social structures within which this reality is taken for granted and within which successive generations of individuals are socialized in such a way that this world will be real to them. The 'sacred canopy' is a useful theory for describing the operations of religion in a culture in which there is one dominant religion. However, more recent sociologists have criticized the model for its inability to account for human behavior in a multi-religious milieu, and have instead called for a new model, known generally as the 'religious marketplace' (Warner 1993). In this model the person seeking after spiritual experience behaves much as a shop customer, seeking out the religious tradition that best suits personal views about spirituality and morality that have already been received by that individual. The 'religious marketplace' model highlights an important factor about religion in the globalizing world. Access to religious ideas, particularly in western culture, is no longer a process of the reception of received cultural wisdom from earlier generations to the extent that it has formerly been. To borrow Wilson's terminology of 'community' and 'society', religion for citizens of western countries is now often a function of 'society' rather than 'community', as the individual has access to a wide range of opportunities for religious experience, and can also interact with large religious organizations in a highly impersonal way, irrespective of the religious choice of their family and peers.

### **Comparisons, conclusion and further research**

The global declaration operates on the principle that an assumed ethical standard will be maintained if rights are upheld, a process which it seeks to enable through policy and legislation. The religious view— and here I take the parliament's document to be representative of the potential contribution of religious belief to a sustainable society — is that the ethic is of paramount importance, and must not be assumed, but specified. They argue that it is not possible to legislate effectively for equality and sustainability, and that a widespread ethic supporting equality and sustainability must exist in order for policy and legislation to be effective. If social sustainability is the discourse of a better society and how it can be achieved and maintained, then a key part of future social sustainability research will be the process of collecting and analyzing information on what people perceive a better society to be, and what steps they think are necessary to achieve and sustain it.

A necessary component of the social sustainability research agenda is, I argue, the understanding that religious belief already contains codified ideas on the ideal shape of society, and that these ideas have been further explored through previous studies in comparative religion and global ethics. What might a future project in social sustainability and religious ethics look like? A large comparative study could be undertaken with attention to multiple religious decrees and policy frameworks from numerous countries, would be required in a systematic comparison of policy frameworks and ethical decrees, and I believe the process of collecting and analyzing the data would suggest these.

Secondly, a grounded research project working with religious and non-religious participants could explore their views on social sustainability (what they perceive a

sustainable society to be and how it might be achieved) and the way their religious belief shapes their responses to sustainability discourse and policy. Such a study would provide a useful base of information for theorizing the interface between religious notions of improved social conditions and social policy-based expressions of improved social conditions, which would assist in theorizing both the development and uptake of sustainability policy in a religious (or semi religious) context.

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