

“SPIRITUALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY TOWARDS EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT”

Speech of M. Kamal Hassan at Webinar on Higher Education Institutions Leadership Towards ESD, on 15 March 2021, Organised by IIUM and AKEPT.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

1.INTRODUCTION.

As an academic staff of the International Islamic University Malaysia, I am honoured to be one of the twenty five writers of the recently published work which explores in depth the issue of Spirituality and its implications on the Sustainable Development Goals. The book, *Spirituality and Sustainability: Experiences of the International Islamic University Malaysia* (Abdul Rashid Moten, ed. IIUM Press, 2020), showcases IIUM as a model of higher education which is infused and inspired by the vision and values of spirituality based on the worldview of the Qur’an. Our book shows that Muslim academics in I.I.U.M., view Agenda 2030 with its SDGs positively as a remarkable achievement of the United Nations in recent times. The goals, though ambitious, are – on the whole – laudable and deserving of support by Muslim countries in the world, even though the dimensions of spirituality, religion and morality in human and global development are not explicitly addressed in this major UN project. To us the exclusion of the spirituality dimension is a serious oversight, and ESD without making spirituality a crucial role in human, societal and civilisational growth would be a gross negligence on the part of leaders of higher education institutions.

To my mind, if there is a greater need for the whole world and contemporary civilisation to be reset by COVID-19 pandemic, the time is now, year 2021. The new paradigm of sustainable development has to be based on the spiritual worldview. As charity should begin at home, the Muslim countries should be the first to undertake the comprehensive and holistic reset of the development paradigm. They do not have to wait until 2030 to shift the developmental paradigm. A new breed of leaders would be needed, though, to plan, manage and drive the Muslim societies forward towards wellbeing in this world and more importantly, wellbeing and happiness in the Hereafter. Under this paradigm, the concepts of development and sustainability itself need to be overhauled, by acknowledging God as a the Owner, Developer and Sustainer of the Cosmos, the world and human beings who were created by Him to serve His purpose. Then the concept of sustainability of the earth or of human civilisation has to be defined in accordance with the will and plan of the Owner and the Sustainer.

2.CONCEPTION OF GOD: RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality from the perspective of Islam – a religion of 1.8 billion human beings -- is the core of God’s religion, although in the West, there are many human beings who prefer spirituality to be separate from organized religion. In the Qur’an’s worldview, it is the One True God who has created the whole cosmos including human beings and nature.

The main difference between the Qur’anic conception of God and those of other major world religions is in His oneness and the belief that He is not just the Creator of the world, but the Ruler, the Sustainer, the Regulator, the Law-Giver, the Judge on the day of Judgement and that His sovereignty covers all aspects of human life and civilization, including the economic, the political, the material and the cultural. His religion is

based upon human submission to His will with complete obedience, sincerity, commitment and love for Him and His Messengers – critical components of Islamic spirituality.

Without obedience to God, loving Him above everything else, sincerity, honesty, truthfulness and seeking His pleasure as the highest value in life, and doing good work for the benefit of society or other human beings, there is no spirituality from the perspective of Islam. But if those spiritual conditions are fulfilled then God as the Sustainer, Provider and Ruler would grant those sincere servants, vicegerents and true Believers a goodly life on earth and life of true and everlasting happiness in the Hereafter.

3.CONCEPTION OF HUMAN BEINGS: ORIGIN, NATURE, PURPOSE OF EXISTENCE, FUNCTION, LIFE IN THE WORLD.

It should be borne in mind that human beings, as God's best creation, are essentially spiritual-moral beings by virtue of; a) the Divinely-created spirit (*rūḥ*) that God had "breathed into" the human body after it is formed, b) the eternal nature of the soul which lives on even after the physical death, and c) the centrality of the spiritual heart in determining and influencing human behaviour and personality. Moreover, humans are also endowed by God with the innate natural disposition (*fitrah*) – without any tinge of sinfulness, inherited or latent -- which acknowledges and naturally inclines towards God as its Spiritual Source, Creator and Sustainer. The Qur'an refers to the Primordial Spiritual Covenant (*Mithaq*) between human beings in their spiritual state and Allah The Most Compassionate in verse 172 of *Surah al-A`raf* (7).

The purpose of human existence is to know and serve God obediently and sincerely and has given human beings Divine guidance to be followed. But God has also created within the human soul the

propensity to evil deeds and desires for worldly pleasures. Satan too exists to tempt mankind away from the God-given path to wellbeing on earth and wellbeing in the Hereafter. Human beings have to keep their hearts clean and purified of the corrupting spiritual ailments such as intellectual arrogance, denial of the existence or sovereignty of God, greed, envy, ostentation, hypocrisy, selfishness, narcissism, egoism, delusion, obduracy, or sense of complete autonomy.

Human beings also have to carry the trust and responsibility of developing and managing the earth as His vicegerent (*Khalifah*) by using the trust of the intellect and limited free-will in accordance with Divinely revealed rules, principles, values and norms (the *Shari`ah*). The Believers in the Religion of God are charged with the duty of enjoining all that is good and right and prohibiting all that is bad and wrong. The servants of God have to be conscious that their life on earth is a prelude to the eternal life, but the society, culture and civilization they have to construct must be in accordance with creed of Islamic monotheism (Tauhid), the Divinely prescribed Way to God (*Shari`ah*) and the Morality of Good Character (*Akhlaq*) based on role model of the Messenger of God (Muhammad s.a.w.). Failure to follow the commandments and guidance of God in His Divinely Revealed Book or the tradition of the Prophet (s.a.w.) would result in existential miseries and suffering in this world, and severe punishment and ignominy in the Hereafter.

4.CONCEPTION OF SPIRITUALITY: THREE KINDS OF FUNDAMENTAL SPIRITUAL RELATIONSHIP.

Spirituality in the worldview of the Qur'an refers to the proper condition and relationships of the Spirit (*Rūh*), the Soul (*Nafs*) and the Heart (*Qalb*) of human beings with God, fellow human beings and nature. The proper

relationship with God is the foundation of Islamic spirituality as explained below:

4. 1). Profound spiritual, intellectual and emotional relationship in the spiritual heart (*Qalb*) with God, the Creator, the Sustainer, the Provider, the Compassionate Ruler and Master of mankind and all that exists; which is manifested in acts of submission, obedience and service of God based on obedience, God-fearing consciousness (*Taqwā*), good character (*Ḥusn al-Khuluq*), moral-social benevolence (*Iḥsān*), remembrance (*Dhikr*) and love (*Maḥabbah*), and all kinds of good deeds for the sake of getting God's good pleasure (*Riḍwān'Allāh*). The best form of spirituality is to be manifested in good deeds, good character and voluntary community services.

4. 2). Good and praiseworthy relationship with fellow human beings, Muslims as well as non-Muslims on the basis of a) equality before God and the criterion of nobility or lofty status based on the quality of God-fearing consciousness, b) respect for the dignity of mankind (*karamah insaniah*) endowed by God in the form of the primordial natural disposition towards God (*fitrah*) and the *Ruh* from God. Believers are required to spread good deeds and behave with good character to the non-Believers as a manifestation of the principle of Spreading Compassion and Mercy to all mankind. (*Rahmatan li'l-'Alamin*). There is within the Muslim community the spiritual bond of Islamic brotherhood which transcends race, colour, geography, language or social status (*caste*) which must be maintained and nourished through various kinds of charitable and philanthropic activities. Since all human beings are equal before God, Islamic spirituality gives no value to skin colour, ethnic origin, wealth or social status as criteria of high rank or nobility in Islam. It is Godliness,

God-fearing quality and piety which are the determining factors of one's position in the sight of God.

4.3.) The Qur'an teaches that God the Most Compassionate has created the physical world and all its forces for the benefit and welfare of His servants' sojourn on His earth. Nature is part of His Kingdom, owned, controlled, nourished and sustained by Him. Natural resources are, therefore, God-given bounties (sing. *ni`mah*) which are – at the same time – Signs of His existence, oneness, sovereignty, knowledge, mercy and will. Unknown to mankind, all of nature including inanimate objects express their praise and glorification of Allah's sovereignty in their own ways, (Q. 17: 44). Being dependent upon the natural resources for their physical needs, all human beings are required to approach those resources (God's Signs and God-bounties) with humility and gratefulness to the Compassionate Sovereign for His providence, beneficence and making nature subservient to them. As they do not own the natural resources, their utilisation of those resources has to be done "in the name of God", by observing the Divine norms of what is permissible (*halal*), forbidden (*haram*), disliked (*makruh*) and preferable or recommended (*mustahabb*). Internalising the spiritual values of humility and gratefulness to God and seeking His blessings (*barakat*) and protection (*himayah*) is the characteristic of the Believers. The God-fearing Believers know that if they were to ignore His ownership, His guidance, His omnipotence and omniscience, and behave arrogantly in the false belief or delusion that they are the owners of the resources, then the Sustainer could, in order to teach the arrogant servants a lesson, terminate the bounties or change the state of the environment or the ecosystem from being productive to being destructive (cf. the story of the companions of two gardens in Q. 18: 34)

We need to reiterate that, from the worldview of the Qur'an, the material world is not an evil place: it is a God-designated space-time and God-given opportunity for a human beings to live in, to work and strive (*jihad*) to serve Divine purposes. It is a temporary abode, no doubt, but it is a necessary abode in which a human being is to develop into a good, righteous and virtuous human (*insan salih*), to work together with fellow human beings for a safe, peaceful and bountiful environment towards establishing a virtuous society (*mujtama` ṣāliḥ*) and a virtuous civilisation (*ḥaḍārah ṣāliḥah*), for the ultimate goal of serving and worshipping (*'ibadah*) God sincerely, thereby earning His pleasure (*ridwan*) and true success and wellbeing (*al-falah*) in the Hereafter.

With regard to the existence of the universe and its constituents, the Qur'an urges human beings, first, to observe, contemplate and then study the world of nature (God's Open Book) as representing countless Signs of God's existence, presence, sovereignty, compassion, knowledge, wisdom and goodness. They are to use their God-given intelligence and reason – guided by Divine revelation -- to discover the potential benefits embedded by the Compassionate Creator-Sustainer in the natural resources, to utilise them for their own wellbeing, for fellow human beings or for all sentient beings, in carrying out their responsibility as the earth's vicegerents, caretakers, and developers. The more the servants learn about the wonderful and beneficial secrets of Allah's natural Kingdom, the more they would appreciate the compassionate attributes of the Most Caring Creator-Sustainer and be grateful to Him. The Qur'an aims at making human beings aware of the Allah's active role in making all of nature, including the heavenly bodies, subservient (*musakhkharah*) and submissive to His vicegerents' worldly needs and then to express their gratefulness to Him throughout their lives.

As Allah's creatures, both nature and human beings are meant to operate in harmony with one another, in accordance with the Divine purpose of preservation of order, peace, balance and the cultivation of the "good life" (*hayah tayyibah*) on earth (Q.16: 97). As trustees of The Creator-Sustainer, and as stewards of the world's resources, human beings are to use natural resources, in the heavens and on earth, within a spiritual and ethical relationship of responsibility, harmony, compatibility, gratitude and respect. Such an outlook is the opposite of the secular or atheistic worldview which produces the notion of "conquest of nature" and the selfish competition and rivalry of nationalistic or ideological forces to gain control of, or monopolise, the earth's limited resources for the world dominance of capitalism, socialism or global hegemony. The Qur'an repeatedly reminds and warns mankind that the *mustakbirun* and *mutakabbirun* (i.e. the arrogant, oppressors, tyrants, immoderates, and those who adopt the attitude of defiance of God's will on account of their worldly power, wealth or material superiority) would have to bear the evil consequences of their ungodly attitudes and unethical actions in this world while severe punishment awaits them in the Hereafter (Q. 63:5; 16: 22, 23; 46:20). This type of spiritual-ethical relationship between the God-fearing vicegerents and the natural Signs of God does not exist -- and cannot exist -- in the contemporary worldview of naturalism, mechanism, materialism, agnosticism, atheism or secular humanism which underly the modern man's approach to nature or to predatory capitalism or late modernity.

It is important to realise that, contrary to the philosophical or mystical notion of inherent soul-body conflict which necessitates suppressing or denying legitimate bodily needs in order for the soul or heart to attain a state of spiritual purity, spirituality in the religion and civilisation of Islam is

expressed by the Believer, not by rejecting or condemning the world, but by living actively and peacefully engaged in the world as a God-obedient and God-fearing servant and vicegerent who has been entrusted by his/her Creator-Sustainer to develop it in accordance with His commandments, to enjoin all that is permissible (*halal*), good (*khair*) and virtuous (*ma`ruf*) and to prohibit all that is bad (*sharr*) or reprehensible (*munkar*) or forbidden (*haram*). In short, his/her spiritual-ethical duty is to promote the public welfare or public good (*maslahah*) and prevent that which is harmful (*mafsadah*) or injurious to society and the environment. In this way his/her way of life and developmental efforts will be in harmony with the five fundamental objectives of the Divine Law (*Maqasid al-Shari`ah*) – the protection, preservation and growth of Religion, Life, Intellect, Progeny and Wealth.

6.CONCLUSION

The educational and leadership implications from the adoption of spirituality as the metaphysical foundation for sustainable development are quite daunting though not insurmountable. For Muslim countries and communities around the world, it is a matter of political will to take the worldview of the Qur'an as the basis of the educational paradigm shift, instead of still treading along the dangerous path that leads to the "lizard's hole", i.e. the path of neo-liberalism which transforms education, particularly higher education, into a profitable economic commodity and university ranking as big business to ensure that the neo-colonialised universities around the world remain intellectually colonized or as factories to produce "captive-minded" scholars or intellectuals, to borrow the well-known term invented by the late Prof. Syed Hussein Alatas.

Now the new mantra being promoted worldwide in the post-capitalist, postmodern era is to humanize education or to decolonize education. For us living in Muslim majority cultures and countries, it means going back to the philosophy of holistic Islamic education in which the purpose is to produce rounded, balanced, holistic, God-fearing and caring individuals, societies and civilisations. These civilizational institutions are based on sound faith in God the One and Only Sovereign; good character; sound knowledge; perennial wisdom; the necessity of living in plural societies in peace and harmony with non-Muslim co-citizens, in the spirit of spreading Peace and Compassion to all the Worlds (*Rahmatan li'l-Alamin*) in order to gain wellbeing in this world and wellbeing and happiness in the everlasting Hereafter.

However, it should be noted that the *insaniyyah* (humanistic) characteristic of Islam (*insaniyyah al-Islam*), is not grounded in the worldview of absolute human freedom and autonomy of human reason and emotion, but in the spiritual doctrine of the Primordial Spiritual Covenant (*al-Mithaq*) between human beings as the obedient servants of God and God the Creator and Sustainer, the Lord, Master and Ruler of mankind and all that exists. Development in the holistic and true sense of the word, we believe, can only be actualized when the human civilization returns to its spiritual origin, give priority to spiritual-ethical principles and values in a world in which God is the living and caring Sustainer and Ruler and human beings of all colours, status and accomplishments are His obedient servants and trustworthy vicegerents. We, representing the Muslim intelligentsia, believe that many of the global crises and calamities in economics, politics, society, culture and environment are rooted in the worldviews or paradigms of secularism, agnosticism, materialism,

naturalism, positivism, capitalism, atheism, scientism and postmodernism which are not addressed in the SDG discourses.

In order to work towards revitalization and regeneration of this holistic theo-centric civilization and spiritualized sustainable development goals in a more challenging and uncertain future, we expect the future educational and administrative leaders of higher institutions of learning, in Muslim countries including Malaysia, to be leaders who are committed to, and exemplify the worldview of, holistic spirituality and ethics which integrate human reason with Divine revelation, this-worldly and other-worldly needs and intellectual quotient with spiritual quotient. We are happy to acknowledge that AKEPT and IIUM together with its current Rector, Tan Sri Prof. Dzulkifli have been emphasizing for more than a decade the importance and urgency of nurturing transformational leaders of higher education who are driven by the spiritual, rational, intuitive and emotional unity of the spiritual Heart (*Qalb*) which is inseparably tied to the Sustainer, Provider, Ruler and Lord of all that exists. For these new breed of leaders, the highest and loftiest objective in their ESD efforts is to gain the good pleasure (*RidhwanAllah*) of the Compassionate and Benevolent Ruler of mankind, not the applause or approval of materialistic, atheistic or hegemonic powers of global dominance.