**Concept of Sustainability in Abrahamic Religions**

***Abstract***

Leaders of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have publicly advocated action to endogenies sustainable development goals as part of their welfare programmes and policies. Within the Abrahamic religions a strong financial emphasises is placed on the necessity of implementing sustainable development goals and expectations in economic and financial practices alongside models such as crowd funding, asset-based financing, microfinance, aid programmes based on trust and *waqf* foundations, and charitable funding of green projects across the globe. There is ongoing empirical and theoretical research on the Abrahamic religions’ contribution to development and saving humanity represented in numerous publications. These works effectively produced by religious leaders, activist groups, economists, academics and professionals require well-substantiated conclusions from collated data to enable meaningful contributions resulting from these efforts towards promoting sustainable development goals.

**Keywords:** Religious faith; Judaism; Christianity; Eastern Orthodoxy; Islam; SDGs; human-centric development

**1. Introduction**

Since ancient times civilisations are exposed to demographic transformations, urbanizations, climate changes, commodity cycles, technological disruptions, fragility and violence and the constant shift of economic centres and power. Impact resulting from these phenomena is constant and across history civilisations, movements, governments, religions have attempted different solutions, by seeking answers to these on-going problems. Humans are vulnerable to extremes and are dominated by the need to survive amid the harshness of nature, as a primary goal in life. People’s knowledge based on their ontologies suggest solutions which are explored here via the religious narratives of the Abrahamic religions.

 A contemporary focus for research bodies centres on sustainable development and its implementation in economic, environmental, social and governance domains. Despite huge efforts from a diversity of institutions to provide meaningful insights into sustainable development, it seems that the world has largely ignored the contributions of religious narratives and welfare programmes as possible solutions to resolve the accumulative problems of humanity. Hence, it is essential to revitalise the beliefs, ethics, knowledge, research, guidelines, codes, and recommendations of Abrahamic religions to promote a value-based understanding of sustainability which people can comprehend, believe in, and accept.

As a result of inherited misconceptions and superstition, many people believe that humanity’s current problems lack relevance to the historical context of past religious scriptures. However, in both ancient and modern times, people tended to consider issues of poverty, environmental disasters, social problems and leadership as intrinsic to the nature of human life. Sole reliance on science to adequately protect people has been proved ineffective as it ignores a range of workable solutions which have operated more effectively than modern solutions provided by scientific models. Explored within this paper are solutions derived from the sources of the Abrahamic religions, offering models for tackling human disadvantage resulting from on-going phenomena.

Today, the constant focus on scientific approaches and tools to solve the misfortunates of humanity ignores the solutions, contributions, efforts, and welfare programmes offered within religious communities. It is a new approach which aims to create a value-free society as a spin-off resulting from globalisation seeking to introduce universal values and solutions for humanity.

Within an articulation of sustainability that acknowledges the importance of science, research, technology, and common sense, it is also vital to review the previous contributions of religious scholarship appealing to human nature and belief systems to adopt traditional strategies within a new framework and context. As part of postmodernist studies, a society cannot survive without a belief system which determines its God given divine knowledge, trust and wisdom.

While the multidimensional meanings of the holy books were considered, the authors of this paper were determined to show that religious teaching can be adapted to the principle of sustainable development and that benefit derived from religious teaching can create a stronger incentive and will for sustainable development goals. Based on the authors’ understanding of Islam, the concepts introduced can be related to other monotheistic faiths who share belief in one God. The discussion retains relevance to other aspects of our lives and is not limited to sustainability, as there are important objectives of human life shared across Abrahamic religions. A future objective is to strengthen this project via the input of experts derived from all religions in order to provide a value-based platform for a sustainable development agenda.

**2. Judaism and Sustainability**

Research in developmentalism has stressed the positive effects of religion on economic development, related to discussions surrounding sustainable development. Many inherited issues which sustainable development goals (SDGs) are trying to resolve have been documented by monotheistic religions.

In relation to demographic transitions, Judaism acknowledges and promotes the “oneness” of God. and imposes lower barriers to entry in the Jewish religious market, whereas there are substantially lower entry blockages when there are many gods. As a consequence, Judaism introduces a monopoly of power and elements of inclusiveness for its religious members.

Taken together, the One God/One Faith duality inherent in Judaism monotheism made it exclusive vis-à-vis other faiths. That exclusivity, in turn, enabled the monotheistic faith of Judaism to become more likely to emerge as a socially dominant or even the national state religion, once it gained traction within a society. A monotheistic state religion, then, can make it fairly difficult for other faiths to surmount entry barriers, precisely due to the mutual exclusivity inherent in its creed, and its association with, and endorsement of, state political authorities (Mayoral and Esteban, 2019).

In analysis of *dina de-malkhuta dina*, R. Yosef Eliyahu Henkin (New York, 1881–1973) argues that the disappearance of the self-governing Jewish community makes for a compelling case to follow R. Isserles’ view in contemporary society. In the Middle Ages, secular governments granted Jews autonomy in matters of civil law. Under that license, Jews established a communal organization, called *kehillah*, and enacted legislation (*takkanot ha-kahal*, lit., ordinances of the community) and imposed penalties for violations of law. In former times, the legal import of *dina de-malkhuta dina* was no more than to establish a duty to conduct oneself as a good citizen vis-à-vis civil laws and regulations of the government. Currently, however, in the absence of the *kehillah* organization, *dina de-malkhuta* may assume the legal character of *takkanot ha-kahal* themselves. Specifically, in democracies where various governmental entities either legislate or have regulatory authority, Jews, who have a say in these matters, effectively cede their *takkanot ha-kahal* function to those governmental bodies. When civil law assumes the status of *takkanot ha-kahal*, civil law prevails, according to R. Henkin, even when the statute involved varies from Jewish law’s position on the matter at hand. Accordingly, as the venue of initial jurisdiction for disputes between Jews, the Jewish court (*Beit Din*) must consider the relevant civil law before rendering its decisions (Levine, 2012).

Adopting R. Isserles’ guidepost for the parameters of *dina de-malkhuta dina* entitles a resident of a neighbourhood zoned as a residential area to protest the operation of a manufacturing enterprise in that area. In the absence of a successful application for a variance clause, the objection should be valid even when the manufacturing enterprise does not generate noise or additional traffic. Thus, in contemporary society, the *halakhic* rights of a manufacturer to conduct a noise-generating enterprise in his home would give way to the zoning codes.

Focusing now on other related concerns, societies are constantly facing the issue of climate change and loss of resources which traditional societies tried to explain using religious narratives. The concept of God’s will or expressions of His wrath are religious explanations of such phenomena. Therefore, a sustainable development approach based on risk mitigation provides a new way of dealing with an old issue. Modernist scholars of Judaism emphasise the importance of science, research, technology, and common sense, to save precious human lives and resources, but only where believers stop attributing negligence and bad deeds to God’s wrath. It is necessary to clarify misconceptions of fundamental precepts in Judaism, such as those relating to fatalism and God’s will regarding whether individuals will be saved or sacrificed to disaster, and holy places are immune to damage (Ghafory-Ashtiany, 2015).

In relation to commodity cycles, modern financial currencies have maintained a connection in Judaism by using a physical commodity base, such as gold, or by tracking a basket of real goods. However, the ability of the financial system to create debt - obligations for the future - is completely detached from the ability of the environment to generate the growth or supply the real resources needed to meet those obligations. Financial market liberalization and deregulation during the latter half of the twentieth century has enabled an unprecedented explosion of debt. Overall debt levels have been rising much faster than the growth of real assets. Indeed, there is no longer any necessary link between the monetary economy and the real *oikonomia*. There is in other words a systemic disconnection between the modern economic order and the environment on which it ultimately depends (Levine, 2010).

While the recent economic emphasis within religious literature has put socioeconomic inequality across religious groups back to the centre of debate in economics, and social sciences more generally, the literature in its attempt to estimate the causal effect of religious beliefs on socioeconomic outcomes has largely overlooked another (equally) plausible explanation of the phenomenon: that of sorting or self-selection on socioeconomic status (henceforth, SES) into religions. This hypothesis was first put forward by Weber himself when he noted that conversions to Christianity and Islam in India were more concentrated among the lower Hindu castes (Weber 1996). Another example of the self-selection hypothesis is the study by Botticini and Eckstein (2005), who argued that Rabbinic Judaism with its emphasis on literacy in order to be able to read the Torah and the Talmud drove Rabbinic Jews who placed less emphasis on education, out of Judaism, leading the remaining Jews to shrink into a better-off minority. Their thesis seems to combine the two hypotheses. On the one hand, there is self-selection on socioeconomic status into religion, since less educated (likely poorer) Jews systematically converted out of Judaism. On the other hand, there is a causal impact of religious beliefs on the accumulation of human capital, since investment in a child’s human capital is driven here by belief in Judaism, and this higher preference for human capital is in turn the primary cause of the positive selection on education of the remaining (non-convert) Jews.

There is also an idea of price control to achieve sustainable consumption. The theological narrative argues that all prices today, with the exception of those under government control, are inherently unstable and should therefore not be considered well defined. The *yatza ha-sha’ar* mechanism does not work to free the short sale from the *se’ah be-se’ah* prohibition, the *yesh lo* mechanism, discussed earlier, accomplishes this objective. What is needed to free the short sale from *avak ribbit* is for the short seller to be in possession of some small number of shares of stock of the company he wants to sell short before executing his trade. Given that the “small portion” criterion is met even if the portion is acquired from the very person who will be making the commodity loan, this condition can easily be satisfied in the organized financial markets today.

In addition, to satisfy the requirements of *yesh lo*, ideally both the short seller and the shareholder that is lending the short seller the stock should be aware that the short seller is in possession of some number of shares of the company and that this factor legitimizes the short sale. As discussed earlier, however, this condition is not indispensable.

**3. Christianity and Sustainability**

Christianity like all religions has many strands and sects. We have concentrating specifically on Catholicism due to its ethical emphasis. While, it would be unfair to argue that Catholicism provides an overarching understanding of Christianity, however, at most it provides a point of orientation to examine the principles of the religion in relation to SDG’s.

Pope Francis during the UN’s Sustainable Development Summit in 2015 endorsed the SDG’s. Placing a focus on sustainability is not entirely a new narrative (broadly speaking) within the archives of Catholicism, however endorsing SDG’s maybe also considered as pious fiction. Catholicism has a rich tradition of ethics and values, while the goal of these moral judgements is not earthly and theological, as the value goodness embedded within them is not final, but instrumental. However, the ethical policies and conceptual framework within the teachings of Catholicism has contained a dimension of sustainability for centuries. Such sustainability is engrained within the notions of shared and public values that are considered common principles and maintained by religiously guided social processes (Kenter *et al*. 2015). Christie *et al.* (2019) argues that these shared values historically provided the “source of sense-making narratives, and codes of conduct”. The historical role of these shared values is interesting as it allowed human civilisation to prosper during times where a majority of resources were scarce. Prior to the industrial revolution economic resources were extremely scarce across the world, so sustainability was dependent on sharing resources. The idea of shared values synchronises with the notion of Common Good within Catholicism. The concept of a Common Good first appears in the Epistle of Barnabas (70–132 CE), which was then later codified by St Augustine (Christie et al. 2019). This idea then paved the idea of a ‘Cosmic Common Good’, (Scheid 2016), which is inclusive of “all people of good will” (Pope Francis 2015).

Catholicism has embedded the notion of ‘common good’ within the framework of justice and morality, by categorically focusing on it as a virtue instead of a righteous norm and underpinning it with altruism and social corporation. Catholicism’s overarching focus is balanced between contempt towards economic progress while maintaining a minimum standard based on the concept of human dignity.

Catholicism’s social policies focus on collectivism, while its economic emphasis is on individualism, by arguing that the ‘The economy exists for the person, not the person for the economy’’ (National Conference of Catholic Bishops 1996). The two-tiered policies are entwined with the key concepts of human dignity and common good, which sets the sustainable approach that is theologically constructed and spiritually rationalised. Moreover, the anti-materialistic notion of virtue discourages urbanisation, while the prominence of working with the God’s grace and God’s creation generates the boundaries of environmental protection. The overall ethical and spiritual structure creates a worldview that values preservation, rather than change. Wealth is viewed largely through the lens of consumption’s function, which creates a moral restriction on consumption. From today’s perspective this creates a narrative that encourages recycling and waste-reduction.

Christianity’s notion of sustainability contains an underlying view of human development, which is construed as development that works with nature (God’s creation) and the environment and causes least disruption to the natural order. Overall, Christianity creates a moral value judgement that inspires sustainable development; however, the theological understanding of sustainability remains slightly different from that defined by the UN sustainability goals. The recent literature on Catholic social teaching has a societal focus with an embedded environmental value, nonetheless, there has always been an implicit, unrecognised tone of sustainability within the Catholic ethical framework, which has fuelled many socio-economic projects aimed at supporting what already exists and resisting change. The current literature has refocused the narrative and made the implicit focus on sustainability into an explicit objective.

A contemporary focus on sustainability and moral concerns within Catholicism has fused with a narrative of identity, especially within the Americas. The emergence of Catholic sustainable ethics has produced a correlation between the significance of being a Catholic and being environmentally friendly (Warner, 2008). The moral concern for the environment is now incorporated within the teachings of the Catholic Church. The impact of this narrative is visible through the operations of Christian faith-based organizations like the Christian Association of Nigeria (Ogbonnaya, 2012). Consequences emerging from this are apparent in transnational activism on sustainability and the increasing engagement of religiously motivated aid workers during environmental disasters (DeTemple, 2006).

**5. Islam and Sustainability**

While Islamic sustainable thought has circulated for centuries through institutions and practices in the Muslim world, the concept of sustainable development in Islamic scriptures is relatively new. It is generally acknowledged that efforts to conceptualize the modern Islamic system dates back to the recent history of developmentalism in the Muslim world which compromised expectations of Islamic economics: incorporating social justice, the environment, concepts of equality and spirituality. As the Muslim world saw the rise of modernity and its negative impact on traditional communities, a desire arose for bringing the postmodernist agenda of sustainability through an Islamic moral economy, which necessitated the formulation of viable models of community building of which economics constituted a major part (Zaman, 2008).

Islamic economics as a developmental economic theory which essentialises the sustainability agenda furthers the goal of introducing radical change to the existing political and economic order. It is not surprising that one of the most appealing aspects of a proposed Islamic economic system was its difference from the dominant systems of the day, capitalism and before its collapse, communism. It provided an escape route away from a Eurocentric hegemonic dominant view of economic social reality that individuals behave rationally regardless of their environment, different cultural backgrounds and values.

The vast majority of Muslims around the world live in economically underdeveloped countries, with high rates of unemployment and demographic transmission, technological disruptions, inflation, illiteracy, violence, low rates of economic growth and low life expectancy (Alatas, 2006). These are the problems which sustainable development aims to solve. Poor national health services, inadequate nutritional status, alongside undeveloped health and safety regulations have serious implication on citizens’ lives. Such factor is compounded by endemic corruption which results in an unjust environment and low educational standards. This is a fair description of the Muslim world during the 1930s, 40s, 50s and 60s, when the attention of Western economists and socialists started to focus on the pains of the Third World. It was a period when development theory and uncritical imitation of external ideas and techniques were applied and adopted in a wholesale manner throughout the Third World (Alatas, 2006:588). That was a general alienation from the main issues of local society, and unquestioning imitation of the Occident.

The founding fathers of Islamic economics, due to the failure of forms of sustainable development in the post-independent states of Asia and Africa in the 1960s and 1970s considered flawed capitalist economic development strategies, which ignored the importance and centrality of human beings and their well-being (Asutay, 2007:5). Neoclassical economic theories view economic development as an end in itself, whereas Islam considers economic activity as a means to an end, and not an end in itself (Zaman, 2008:16) thereby, relating to the sustainability of individuals and community by responding to old as well as modern challenges. From this, Islamic scripture across history essentialises building an economic system as a part of the order of an Islamic worldview (El-Ghazali as quoted in Asutay, 2007:5) which aims to provide harmony between individuals, society and the environment. Profit itself as part of a utilitarian theory cannot be the principle driving factor for humanity (Avdukic and Khaleel, 2020).

The founders of Islamic economics Mohammad Baqir Al-Sadr and Sayid Abul A’la Maududi, emphasised the universal validity of Islamic sustainable developmentalism , based on the assertion that the Islamic tradition demands building society through the application of justice (*adl*) and benevolence (*ihsan*) which does detrimentally impact anyone in the process (Asutay, 2007). The authenticity of Islamic notations is derived from the anthology of Islam and the Sunnah (Mergaliyev, *et. al.* 2019). It provides a systemic way of solving human problems by producing a theoretical policy base to counter the underdevelopment of Muslim societies through the norms, values and principles of Islamic ontology with the objective of creating a human-centred sustainable development process (Asutay, 2012).

Unpacking the Islamic notation of sustainability, provides universality along with the holistic approach of Islamic economics, based on the distinctiveness of homogeny embedded within Muslim societies, thereby, targeting the observed reality of the Muslim world. The theoretical development of Islamic developmentalism started by discussing and relating historical and contemporary civil organizations and institutions found in or derived from ontological sources in Islam such as *zakah* and *waqf* (Zaman, 2008:19). For Alatas, it was a call to revamp theoretical perspectives and create visions of a new Islamic order of sustainable development along social, economic, and political lines (Asutay: 2007:5).

Islamic traditional sources according to Volibeigi, aims to transform Muslim communities based on a dependent economy, into an economically sustainable society (1993:794) citing dissatisfaction with hegemonic capitalist models of development in the 1950s, and rejection of the ideology of “caching up” with the West (Ahmed, 1992). The failure of developmentalism in the Muslim world was always related to different reasons such as: urban biases, external biases, a backward sloping supply curve, management inefficiency, while the application of a Eurocentric theory to develop the Islamic world while attempted can be deemed inappropriate (Ozey, 2002:97). The conventional Western notation of value-free and objective economics for all people regardless of their philosophical and ideological endorsements undermines the reality that the conventional capitalist economics itself is socially constructed, and hence is merely the “expression of ethical and political commitments of a particular society (Zaman, 2008:14). A so-called universal capitalist theory, according to Ahmad is a product of certain religio-moral and politico-economic contexts of Western-European societies in a particular episode (2003:182) therefore, it is not in conformity with the one inspired by Islam, and cannot advance human welfare in regards to handling economic affairs in Muslim states.

The newly emerged Islamic concept of sustainability has a different stance on life and the nature of social change which implies a unique set of policy options for the solution of development issues. Islamic economists have attempted to articulate an alternative concept of sustainable development, refusing to evaluate the backwardness and progress of Muslim societies in terms of Western theoretical perspectives and values. In this way, Islamic economics is post-modernist in tone and can be added to other critiques of development (Alatas, 2006:592). It refuses the modernist projection of universal values, in the everyday life of an ordinary individual.

The most notable distinction of postmodernist literature on sustainable development is underestimation of the value-elements and ethics that have directly or indirectly shaped production, distribution, consumption, price, and so on. The founding fathers of Islamic economics explain that religion, ideology or any strong set of values, ideals and morals have an impact and influence in forming the normative base of an Islamic developmentalism, which has to be taken into consideration. Therefore, Asutay rightly says: ‘the rationale behind a distinct sustainable model as articulated in [the] religion of Islam, is obvious since the values, axioms and foundational principles (2007:5), and the imperatives are different (Zaman, 2008:18).

When Islamic economists discuss inherited problems intrinsic to both modern and traditional societies, such as, demographic transitions, urbanization, climate and resources, commodity cycles, technological disruptions, fragility and violence, shifts in the global economy and globalization, they do so in terms of ethical statements and prescriptions and not in terms of analyses and empirical theory (Alatas, 2006:592). ِAs Asutay explains: “no human endeavour is value-free, which implies that reality including economic reality is socially constructed” (2007:5).

Taken from the discussion outlined above, the foundational base of Islamic sustainable developmentalism can be summarised as:

1. The explicit acceptance of Divine Revelation as a source of knowledge and certain detailed pivotal institutions that are explicitly ordered or deduced from Islamic sources. These institutions are the prohibition of *Riba* (interest), *Ghrara* (uncertainty), *haram* (prohibitive products and services), the private-public mix of property/ownership, the spiritual-material mix of success, *Zakah*, *Awqaf*, *etcetera*. Following on from these, Islamic sustainable developmentalism prevailed within the pre-modern societies of Islamic civilisation which implies that the sustainable agenda is embedded in Islamic ontology and epistemology (Kahf, 2012:4).
2. The acceptance of the moral characteristics induced via Divine Revelation, were formed on both the levels of principle and those enshrined within practical rules and regulations. The morally assigned codex delineates a boundary demarcating the accessible set of actions/ decisions/ behaviours intrinsic to sustainable development. The system is equipped with an ability to judge possible courses of action on moral grounds, just like any other system, although an Islamic system differs by adding additional external screening apparatus manifest in a set of morally-based prescriptive rulings derived from Shari’ah law. Therefore, since Islamic morality originates from Divine Resources it includes items not conventionally considered as part of a sustainable agenda, such as, spiritual development in addition to material progress (Kahf, 2015).

A great consensus prevails on these foundational bases shared between the major monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. According to Islam such commonalities arise due to the is continuity and similarity of the value systems of these revealed religions. Therefore, if modernist theories had continued to develop in the image of a Judeo-Christianity worldview as fashioned before the Enlightenment Movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there is a probability that the subsequent creation of a secular, value-neutral, materialist and social Darwinist worldview of developmentalism may not have emerged (Chapra, 2010:4), established upon modernist ideological reasoning (Hashim and Rossidy, 2000) and, consequently, a Western vision of reality and rejection of revealed Truth, which has never deviated from a sustainable agenda. Muslim economists “with reference to God as being [the] origin (of knowledge), is the arrival in the soul of the meaning of a thing or an object of knowledge; and with reference to the soul as being its interpreter, knowledge is the arrival of the soul at the meaning of thing or an object of knowledge” (Al-Attas as quoted in Hashim and Rossidy: 2000:5).

**7. Conclusion**

The implicit focus on sustainability is embedded within the ethical framework of almost all religions, although the role of the three monotheistic Abrahamic faiths in promoting sustainable development are outlined in this discussion. The theological nature of religious moral argument creates a need for appreciating what exists as it is seen as part of God’s grace upon humanity. While, human initiated development is approached within the shadow of this understanding. Nature – and indirectly the environment - are approached as unconditionally good. While, human initiated development is approached as a conditional good, where the condition of goodness can change. The moral value assigned by religions to nature as a whole has always created an underling tone for its preservation and safety within a religious discourse. This makes such a religious discourse one of the earliest narratives created on sustainability by humans.

The purpose of this article is to briefly survey relevant themes within the religious traditions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism to demonstrate that the theologically constructed narrations within these religions are the pioneer texts within the broader generator of sustainability. While this article argues for the primacy of religious thoughts in general, as the Abrahamic religions produced the first narratives on sustainability. It is also acknowledged that these narratives were never developed nor contextualised within prevailing socio-economic conditions, and the significance of sustainable development remained implicit within their narratives. Consequently, we can trace the need for sustainable development within the religious discourse and we can highlight the traces of such narratives within the social institutions and programmes constructed on religious narratives. However, we also acknowledge that the emphasis on sustainable development was lost within the moral contextualisation of theological beliefs. This is consistent with the discussions on the origin of moral judgements across cultures and traditions within the Moral Foundations Theory (Graham *et al*., 2013).

Sustainable development requires the promotion of values while narratives within the Abrahamic religions can help promote sustainable development practices within religious communities around the world. However, there is also a need for reconciling the concept of sustainable development within the Abrahamic faith traditions to reflect notions of sustainability expressed within the United Nation’s sustainable development goals.

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