Review

Faith-based ethical reform for social stability and sustainable development

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Modern human societies, floating on the so-called secular values, seem to be disoriented, despondent and disarrayed without having specific goals in life and commitment to God and His creation, and thus suffering from unprecedented level of moral decadence. Humanity is at the cross-roads of secular (atheistic) and sacred (religious) approaches to civilization. Secular humanism without any theology of its own and promising no answer to the riddle of death is hardly in a position to guide mankind about the meaning and purpose of life and what is universally good or bad for them. On the other hand, religious ethics and morality are commitments to safeguard social people from wrong doing and promote a world of universal good and brotherhood, peace and trust. Islam and all other revealed religions, for example, have the holy commitment to call all humans to bid the right and forbid the evil and establish the religious world order and the 'City of God', with piety, peace and prosperity as its centre piece. It is, therefore, argued that for ensuring social stability and sustainable development morals founded on the eternal and universal values enshrined in all the major religions can play a pivotal role.

Key words: Sustainable development, social stability, ethics, morality, religion, secularism, summum bonum.

INTRODUCTION

We are living in what appears to be the age of 'super-high' technology' where the next challenge for the scientists is believed to be, not just how fast objects could be moved, but how objects would be moved, not by other objects but by just thinking about the objects. Despite the amazing advancement of science and technology, the globe is facing multifaceted crises such as increased violence, intolerance, tension, alienation and agitation that seem to have no end. On one hand, we seem to be blessed with a world in which our knowledge in science, technology, economics and politics stands superior to that of any 'golden age' of the past, on the other, our un-self-critical ultra-modern society faces unprecedented moral problems of life.

Our global village is suffering most from degradation of morality and disintegration of traditional values.

Deplorably, knowledge seems to be divorced from values, as people are trying to gain great power without insight. Our existence is in jeopardy; humanity is at stake, the reason being more of moral crisis and spiritual confusion than political instability and economic recession. 'A hungry man is an angry man' type philosophy does not seem to apply in curbing tension and frustration among the youths, as we know aggression and arrogance, in reality, usually spring up more from the riches.

Moral decadence and corruption of various forms are the common features of individual and social behaviours in most societies and cultures in the world. If Transparency International's (TI) reports are accepted at least as an indication of the nature of things, then the situation in most high- and low-income countries and cultures is very alarming. Finding solution to this problem is the cry of the day all over the world. As a result, we find almost everywhere a strong realization of the need for ethics-based knowledge as a means of lasting solution to

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that problem. But one of the tragic features of our present day education and research programs and policies is the stress on highly specific knowledge and skills, sidelining traditional values, religious morals and ethical principles. Ethical and moral orientations of the subject matters of studies are mostly absent from the academic curricula. There is therefore an urgent need for a proper revision of academic and research programs at universities and other institutions that would promote ethics-based knowledge and culture. Ethics shapes the behaviour of individuals and society, and morality is the standard of measurement of that behaviour. Therefore, morality is rooted in ethics, which is rooted to religious values. But morality and ethics are not always viewed from this religious perspective. These are also viewed from secular or universal (natural) perspective, particularly in cultures and societies that de-emphasise faith-based values. In this paper, we shall address ethics from its religious perspective to analyse how more studies and better understanding and practices of religion can improve our ethical and moral standards to substantially reduce corruption and immoral practices in the society. In this discourse on the epistemology of ethics we would like to focus on the nexus between secular and faith-based ethics and morals.

CRUX OF THE PROBLEM AND NEED FOR ETHICAL REFORM

Not the inter-faith conflict, but the clash between divine values and secular values and between secular civilization and religious civilization seems to be the crux of the problem facing the human society in the present day world.

Since the 17th century, religion has lost its dominance and grip on the world order giving way to the rise and triumph of the secular culture and civilization. Religion has been pushed back to the backyard as an outdated way of life having no relevance to the reality of modern society. With its popular intellectual and political appeals, the 'secular' was able to replace the 'sacred' in the world order, giving rise to conflict between atheistic civilization (of the West) and religious civilization (of the East) as reflected in Huntington's Clash of Civilization (1996). The secular order is primarily based on atheistic and materialistic humanism, which pursues the philosophy of 'survival of the fittest' with value system that maximizes sensual pleasure, rejecting the role of conscious pursuits of higher goals of life. Material gain and political power set the standard and tune of morality; ethics is an obsolete concept and has no appeal. The approach is managerial performance– 'do it, no matter how, but do it.' Having no care and respect for human values man is thus transformed into lower level animal. Thus moral decadence, atrocities and oppression, social instability and disintegration, exploitation and injustice, etc., at individual and state

levels, aided by scientific and material advancement without commitment seem to have become essential phenomena of the present day secularized world order characterized by drug and sexual abuses, promiscuity, homosexuality and aggression. Arnold Toynbee described this human degradation and malaise and menace of secular world order as the sickness of modern society and sought solution through spiritual development based on religious foundations.

EPISTEMOLOGY OF ETHICS

Though the terms 'morality' and 'ethics' are often used interchangeably, strictly speaking, they have different contextual connotations. The term 'morality' is used to mean moral standards and moral conduct while 'ethics' is used to the formal study of those standards and conduct. Moral philosophers have proposed a number of theories regarding the determination of standards of judging 'right' and 'wrong'. Some of the major theories are: standard as law, standard as pleasure, standard as perfection, standard as determined by evolution, standard as given by intuition, standard as value, etc. Morality is an inner faculty like rationality and is contained in love of truth, beauty and goodness. Morality is derived from the sense of morality of the rational being with good intentions. Goodness is not a capacity or potentiality but an activity that can be good if it springs from rationality. A good man is the one who acts rightly and justly. More so, a just man is the one who possesses good conduct, which is again not a capacity but a habit or custom of voluntary actions. Morality therefore is not a principle but an action and history, where ethics is the principle of that act of morality. We however note that, religion reinforces the ground of morality and reshapes our moral standard of conduct; and therefore ethics is more deeply rooted to religion. Philosophical ethics, or secular ethics, as is known in the West, is primarily a part of the quest for truth. Ethics aims at finding out the rightness and wrongness of the conduct of human beings living in societies, and conduct is a collective name for voluntary actions. The basic questions raised in ethics include: What does it mean to be right or wrong? How can one differentiate good from bad? Are morals objective or subjective? Are morals relative or universal?

Religious and non-religious roots of ethics

The term stating the closest meaning of ethics is perhaps justice with fairness. In an analytical manner, we can identify morality as doing right thing while avoiding wrong doing, and find ethics as the guiding principles in determining what is right and what is wrong. This basic issue of right and wrong can be addressed by asking the question who we are, how we are, and for what purpose we

are. Dependable answers to these basic philosophical questions cannot be found without support of religious worldviews of individuals. Setting up of these guiding principles (ethics) therefore, in turn, is tied up with religious worldview that serves as the lens through which all understanding and thinking of an individual (or society) can take place to the extent that human minds with different hierarchies of mental capacities can exhibit. Thus, we may argue that morality through ethics is ultimately rooted to religion. It may be regarded as the standard of measurement of achievements of religion.

Indeed, morality is linked to religion in many ways. But we may have different viewpoints in this regard. Some claim that religion is prior to morality, whereas others say the opposite. There are also striking claims that morality is independent of religions. Even some may go further and argue that religion obstructs human freedom and human development. However, modern philosophers such as Locke (1632 – 1704), Descartes (1596 – 1650) and Paley (1743 – 1805) hold that the source of all morals lies in the commandments and wills of God. They argue that although man is free, his will is not, for his will is determined by God's will. To be moral, man must follow God's commandments without any question. For persons who subscribe to religious morality, the rules are handed down to them from the Supreme Being, who makes them unbreakable and unquestionable. Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) holds that morality, which is the highest commandment of pure reason, leads individuals ultimately towards religious belief, 'through which it extends itself to the idea of a powerful Lawgiver, outside of mankind' (Kant, 1793). Kant's theory of moral hete-ronomy was endorsed by James Martineau (1805 – 1900), John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873), Herbert Spencer (1820 – 1903), and so on.

There is an influential philosophical tradition that main-tains that ethics is an autonomous field of inquiry without any support of religion. It is argued that ethical judgments can be formulated independently of revealed religions and that humans can cultivate practical reason and wisdom, and by their applications achieves virtue and excellence. However, for secular thinkers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 – 1980), Nietzsche (1844 – 1900) and so on, the existence of an objective moral standard is not dependent on religious commitment, and the non-existence of God does not preclude the possibility of there being an objective standard on which to base moral judgments.

Rachels (2002) in his doctrine of cultural relativism holds that moral codes are subjective and that there is no objective standard or universal truth in ethics, as the concept of morality differs from culture to culture. In his view, God's existence cannot be proved on the basis of morality and one who believes in God cannot be a free moral agent, for to believe in God is to obey the commands of God, ceasing his freedom of will. Rousseau (1712 – 1778) in his Social Contract considers religion as an obstacle to mould good and honest citizens. Russell (1872 – 1970) in his Why I am not a Christian, goes several notches down and labels religion as the 'dragon' guarding at the door of golden age of mankind, just as Marx (1818 – 1883) supposes religion as the 'opium' of the poor. Furthermore, some philosophers argue that social justice can be established without religious influence and that religions are not prerequisites for an individual's obligations and responsibilities toward others. In many cases, thus, people would find the source of morality outside of religion, such as the inherent value of all human beings. Thus, secular humanists claim that there is no need to derive morality from religious belief, because there are moral people who do not espouse a religious doctrine. For secular humanists, ethical conduct is, or should be judged by critical reasoning and their goal is to develop autonomous and responsible individuals, capable of making their own choices in life based upon an understanding of human behaviour. However, the Pope in the homily, gave at the synod's opening mass in St Peter's Basilica in 2005 (the daily Independent, October 3, 2005, Dhaka) asserts that when man makes himself the only master of the world and master of himself, justice cannot exist but arbitrariness, power and interests rule; and so it is hypocritical to exclude religion from decision making in public life.

FAITH-BASED ETHICAL REFORM MOVEMENT

Humanity is now at the cross-road of secular (atheistic) and sacred (religious) approaches to civilization. Strategically, all believers are called upon to make the pattern of history (that is, the world order) follow the revealed principles. All religious communities are under the sacred pledge of bidding the good and forbidding the evil. They cannot allow the world to fall in the hands of the ungodly. They are duty-bound to restore the lost unity of the nature and moral world. This call for ethical reformation of the social order is a movement, a call to all humans – come one come all – to join hands under the philosophy of cooperation to build knowledge, institutions and a world order based on common eternal and universal values enshrined in major religions, particularly the revealed ones (Molla, 2005).

Privileged position and the cutting edge of faith-based ethics

Major world religions inherently contain supernatural elements. It is this supernatural and divine reference that makes morality universal. Some thinkers tend to confine morality to a single domain, but we must not forget that religion has no reservation for any particular community or nation; it teaches and preaches the brotherhood and unity of man; its outlook is humanitarian. We argue for the necessity of the single God in religion, because if

there is no such God each person must define 'good' and 'bad' in ways that will benefit him, as individuals do have radically different moral intuitions and notions of standards of moral judgment. Morality, in that case, loses its universality, because if each person defines 'good' and 'bad' for himself or herself, there can be no objective moral standard, and we may turn to the Sophist ethical system of judging 'good' and 'bad' by the standard 'man is a measure of all things'.

We feel the necessity of God for morality in the sense that since God is absolutely good, God's commandments serve as an objective and absolute standard of 'good' and 'bad'. God's goodness is manifested and based on good evidence, our purpose for living, scriptural data with clear directives to choose freely good from evils, guidance, messages with messengers and the like. God made us free to exercise our freedom of will to make our moral life, for which we are judged as good or bad. We argue for the necessity of religion on the ground that morality may exist in a way without any support from a religion but that would be a different morality. In deed, the existence of God is 'a postulate of the useful if not of the necessary kind in ethics'. Moreover, the theists claim that humans possess a basic moral standard implanted by God. It is consistent with the basic innate moral principles and unchanging ethical codes applicable to all rational beings. However, it may be argued that they do not contend that all moral decisions are drawn directly from men's innate moral understanding; rather, only general principles are innate and that men must use reasons to arrive at specific moral decisions. Since humans are created as rational and free moral agents and they possess the power to conceive of alternate moral codes, it is imperative that they use this power of choice in making decisions. That is why we see some people appear to be more morally sensitive than others.

Religion not only gives objectivity to moral values, but also implies a certain metaphysical outlook. As religious people, we believe that 'the voice of conscience is the voice of God within us' and feel that 'there is in our human nature an urge towards what is higher and better which can never be explained in merely natural terms.' Thus, divine ethics reflects human ethics. In his Wealth of Nations, Adam Smith's theme that a 'sympathy faculty' exists side by side with the self-interest faculty in human nature is a reflection of this human ethics (Smith, 1776).

Religion covers a wide area of human conduct; for example, Islam, which is a complete code of life, tells us what is required, recommended, permitted, discouraged and forbidden. It affirms freedom of will of man. The object of moral judgment is not only end, but means, end, intention, and the result as well. God, who is essentially of ethical nature, is the necessary postulate for moral judgment. From this perspective, Islam, for example, subscribes to three categories of ethical concepts: those that refer to the ethical nature of God, such as 'merciful,' 'just,' 'benevolent,' etc., secondly, those that describe the

basic attitudes of man towards God, and thirdly, those that refer to the principles and rules of conduct regulating the ethical relations among individuals who belong to, and live within, the religious community as well as the international community, that includes all religious and non religious communities, on the basis of their humanity and will to peace alone (Izutsu, 1966; Al-Faruqi, 1987, 1989).

In secular ethics, pleasure is desirable and the maxim is 'highest pleasure for the highest number of people'. On the contrary, religion attaches importance to peace more than pleasure. That is how we find Islam as a religion of moral law, Buddhism as an ethic of eight-fold path and compassion, Christianity as an ethic of love and brother-hood, and Judaism as an ethic of divine commandments. The list goes on. In fact, the origin and development of moral consciousness began in ancient Greece, India, China and Iran with primitive religious beliefs, myths, ancient religious scriptures, etc. Throughout the ancient and medieval periods, our ethical thinking was largely determined by moral traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. But, in recent times, moral philosophers have tended to divorce moral virtues from religious traditions and heavily rely on human critical thinking. However, it cannot be denied that our customs and conventions, out of which custom ethics arises, are influenced and shaped by religious morals. In fact, religions can and most of them actually have adopted customs, with necessary modifications in form and substance, into their ethics. Both Plato and Aristotle emphasized this custom ethics to form the social custom based on morality in a bid to purge human characters from evils. This view is widely accepted by John Dewey (1859 – 1952) in modern times.

Moral values are necessary conditions for any deve-lopment – social, moral, economic and human. Social values are different in types and ends in accordance with the social status and structure. A rule may be highly regarded in a certain society, but at the same time it may be bitterly deemed as harmful in another society. It is believed that moral codes vary considerably according to the conditions in which the operation is committed, and the society in which a certain group or community lives. Values – social, religious, moral – are at stake in the society especially in a developed country where people believe in uncommitted individual freedom without regard for religious virtues. Morality without subscription to religion, in that case, is likely to be antisocial, subjective, or promiscuous, as it leads to the breakdown of moral standards.

Social values can be viewed in terms of how much and what kind of freedom is provided with man and what laws are framed to protect the individuals and the society from moral breakdown. Laws have foundations on which they stand. It is widely argued that we need laws that are based on religious morals, since the purpose of law is to enforce moral and religious principles. Such laws, if adopted rightly can lay the foundations of the society

towards the right path or the path most people would expect to follow for a moral life. For example, many of our laws are based on the principle of honesty and the value we place on this principle is very much influenced by our religions. A great advantage of these laws founded on religious ethics of humanitarianism advocated by major religions of the world are naturally dynamic to accommodate adjustment to suit the changes in human attitude over time.

A society in which moral, social and religious values are respected and practiced is expected to be much more peaceful than other societies. For example, in a society where adultery is not considered a crime by law, people may abstain from committing adultery not because of social punishment but because of religious aberration. Religious values, therefore, can safeguard social people from wrong doing. This illustration can be compared to any country in which people are more inclined to indulge in individual desire for not believing in religious principles. Our youths are extremely frustrated with their misdeeds. Both societal and moral laws are needed to arm them with core ethical virtues such as honesty, responsibility, respect, civic duty, courage and co-operation. As a pathway of curbing corruption from the society, business leaders must avail themselves to the great ethical traditions found within the world's religions and cultures. Much of our civil law is rooted in religion. The major religions of the world contain three canonical elements – belief or faith, practice or action and virtue or value. Religion is the source of the ethical values of most people, and laws reflect these ethical values setting minimum standards with which citizens must comply. Therefore, to be effective, laws of the country must properly reflect the ethical values of its people. When the values reflected in a country's laws stray too far from the values of its people, those laws are likely to lose support, leaving coercive force as the only means of obtaining compliance. That is why law and religion at times may engage in tension.

Bruhi (1988) and Manzoor (1989) are convinced that secular humanism with no theology of its own and promising no answer to the riddle of death is dubious both in nature and organic structure. It is hardly in a position to guide mankind to the meaning and purpose of life. Moreover, any social system or civilization, to be operationally successful, effective and sustainable, must have three fundamental components: legitimacy, order, welfare/well-being (LOW), with legitimacy as the first and foremost condition (Rashid, 1997). As a result, any civilization founded on secular ethics and having no legitimacy (that is, divine backing) has the greatest risk of failing to work and sustain. A social order based on religious ethics, on the other hand, has better chance to be successful and sustainable.

Cultures and religions are intermingled in our society. Culture means cultivation of the human mind and thus becomes synonymous with life and its activities, both inward and outward, and whether this life is of an individual or of the class or group to which we belong. In its group aspect, it manifests itself in our language and literature, art and philosophy, customs and traditions, norms and laws. Every culture is, at bottom, an attitude of mind, a living idea, which inspires and moulds our life. The cultures which religions aim to promote are reflections of the harmony which prevails in the divine working of the universe containing twin principles – individual peace and happiness and peace and happiness of mankind as a whole through moral progress with clear-cut directives of what man ought to do to this end. Religion is an integral component of cultural values. Its content is the lens through which all his understanding and thinking take place. It is therefore the essence and core of civilization; in that, if culture is the body of the society, religion is its mind and soul. Thus religion shapes culture and civilization; when body and soul work in harmony the result is social stability and achievement reaches its highest peak.

Optimism of the movement

To counter and reverse the trend of secularization of the world order and moral decadence and disorder, there has come the move for a faith-based intellectualism and activism with Islamization of knowledge leading the way. Sardar (1989) observes that, like the early crescent contemporary Muslim thought has made an appearance. In the same way, vein Manzoor (1989) is optimistic that even though the secular tradition has penetrated deep into society and shaken its religious foundation, it could not detach society from religious roots; the unity of faith and world will reemerge soon. Mazrui (1994, 1995) is hopeful that religion and policies (state) will be reunited in new ways. Mazrui therefore advises Huntington and other protagonists of secular civilization to reexamine the efficacy and validity of their models. He calls them to come closer to the social microscope and look again to discover that they are in fact in the fault-lines. Hammond (1995) notes that in the USA where secular order in general term is a settled matter, yet it is the object of much attention and dispute; 'family values' are the 'reigning mantra' of the day. In the USA and North Europe, nobody wants a wholly secular order if secular means disconnected from traditional and religious values. The Islamization of knowledge is a part of this grand movement designed to counter the secularization and establish a social order based on religious ethics and thereby rescue mankind from the path of degradation and ruination at the hands of the secular thought and civilization. It promises to replace the secular with the sacred. Islamization of knowledge movement wishes to achieve that through participation and cooperation of all religious communities (Millahs) and individuals based on the primordial and eternal truth underlying all religions.

Muzaffar (1997) calls this as a shared spiritual vision. Islam's ethical reform movement therefore is structured based on the:

(1) Fundamentals of truth that: a) everyone is born with a religious nature, b) religion is a mercy and divine guidance for the benefit of mankind to live in peace and harmony in a plural global society, c) it contains guidance and ideal trend for humanity to advance perpetually establishing and upholding the right and justice and forbidding the wrong.
(2) Eternal-universal values like goodness and truth, justice, kindness, equality of mankind and brotherhood, piety and righteousness, freedom of religion and belief etc., as guidance for establishing God's willed society on earth for men to live in peace (Molla, 2005).

CONCLUSION

In today's fluid world, values do not seem to have any permanent nature for the materialists who tend to lose the meaning and purpose of life. They float on 'so-called secular values' that frequently change themselves without specific goals in life and commitment to God, divine laws and His creations. They end up with despair and frustration, leading to a dangerous way of living on earth. They not only harm themselves but others as well. Religion, on the contrary confirms an individual his self-esteem and respect for others, commitment to the moral codes and prescribed codes of conduct such as 'generosity,' 'simplicity,' 'humility,' 'kindness,' 'goodness,' and the like that benefit himself and the society in which he lives with others in harmony and peace. Religious values have universal and humanitarian appeal; religion, therefore, can never be detrimental to social customs, if applied in its pristine sense. Human societies can and should now benefit from these to reform what can be considered hostile to moral and spiritual development of human beings – the 'crown of creation' of God. A true believer's heart is purged of all greed, lust, desire that cause one to take the path of corruption and sin. His actions and behavior are guided and motivated by the religious codes of conduct attuned for social peace and harmony which are requisites for sustainable development of a society. For example, in Islam, a believer is guided by five categories of the moral codes of human actions: 'obligatory' (wajib), 'recommended' (mandub), 'disapproved' (makruh), 'prohibited' (mahzur) and 'indifferent' (ja'iz). They constitute the moral character of an Islamic way of life. This kind of religious ethics is deemed as not only divine moral, but also human ethics which is indispensable for modern people to be led and guided by divine laws for moral, spiritual and social development.

What is the summum bonum (the ultimate good) in life? Secular ethics defines it as that which is desired or that which brings pleasure in life. Religion does not subscribe to this view, because this seems to lead us to the view that whatever gives pleasure is desirable. But man's devil mind may very often allow many evil and perverted versions of pleasure, which cannot and must not be acceptable to the people inspired by divine values. For example, from the ethico-religious point of view, we cannot call it an acceptable norm if one finds pleasure in illicit sexual affairs or perverted sexual orientations, or engagement in crime and corruption? Religions vehemently oppose this kind of secular definition of good life in relation to pleasure. Pleasure or happiness is not all that is involved in the summum bonum in religion.

The summum bonum in religious life is obviously a moral and enlightened life, leading to attainment of 'peace' at individual as well as social levels; it is as opposed to 'happiness' in secular life-style. This motivates the mankind of all races and faiths to choose a virtuous life in this world with the hope of a reward of 'good life,' that is, the 'eternal peace' in the life hereafter. As God promised in the holy Qur'an, 'We shall pay them a recompense in proportion to the best of what they used to do.' Therefore, the commitment of today's ethical reform movement should focus on re-establishing religious civilization and replacing the secular 'life-styles' with the sacred divine ideals in the world order for a sustainable world peace, happiness and prosperity.

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