

## RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENTAL GOALS

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**Abstract:** Religion and religious teachings have always been one of the driving factors of the individual’s behaviour. And not only on individual level. Throughout the history of humankind, religion has shaped and significantly influenced almost every aspect of the community and society: social, cultural, political, economic etc. Religions have always strived and preached for a community that offers equal opportunities for everyone, without discrimination on any basis, society where no one is left behind. Beside the view on an individual level, religious teachings all agree that it is of utmost importance for believers to take care of the nature, environment, planet. In other words, almost all religions preach for creating and sustaining an environment which will have to be nurtured and taken care of. Being aware of the influence of the religion on the entire society, the world leaders and the major international organizations are trying to involve the religious leaders and communities in the global initiatives for sustainable development. The process of creating global sustainable development is led by the UN and it seems like we are learning the lessons: compared to the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030 involve not only state authorities but also the civil society. Among them, for sure, are the religious leaders. This paper will examine the teachings of Christianity and Islam that reflect on SDG 2030. The goal is to review how religious teachings can significantly influence the process of sustainable development. The need to help the poor and needy, among others, is crucial part of the religious teachings of Christianity and Islam. Philanthropy, charity, care and compassion toward those in need are some of the features of Christianity contributing to sustainable development, just as Islam has the zakat and sadaqah in its teachings. In this regard, understanding the religious teachings, religious dynamics and the role of faith communities and actors is necessary to enable sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Religion, SDG, Christianity, Islam, philanthropy, zakat.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

From the ancient times, religious institutions and faith communities have had inclusive approach and have helped the ones in need. Even before the modern religions were present, philanthropy was one of the main drivers for people to help the other people, no matter if we are speaking about the poor, children or elders.

Nowadays, Christianity and Islam in their religious teachings have many mechanisms to help the needy and show the care and compassion toward those in need. Throughout different periods of humanity, the faith communities have contributed significantly to helping believers survive the difficult times. Many research and reports show that many people who are highly religious are more engaged with their extended families, more likely to volunteer and more involved in their communities (PewResearchCenter, 2016). Making the believers aware of the environment and community, with its own religious teachings, Christianity and Islam are contributing toward building communities that are sustainably developing. And exactly this sustainable development is one of the main priorities of the entire humankind, global process led by UN.

The first attempt toward creating a sustainable development was the process of creating the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). However, while there was very little consultation outside the UN during setting the MDG, Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030 followed a different path and process. Realizing that greater portions of development aid are now channeled via faith-based initiatives/organizations (FBO), and religion is increasingly recognised as a resource for – rather than as an obstacle to – development. (Haustein and Tomalin, 2019), UN took different approach. Many different actors were included in the process, making it one of the largest civil society consultations in the history of the UN.

Looking from this perspective, it might be little too early to evaluate if the process got better (although we are at the middle of the planned implementation of the SDG, 2030 being the deadline), but it looks like the more inclusive process, the better. Including a large portion of civil society, and especially including the religious leaders and communities in planning, promoting and implementing the SDG seems like much better approach than the process of negotiating MDG. The inclusive approach of religions and “leave no one behind” principle go in line with the SDG.

Looking at the discourse of the religion in the last century, it is obvious that there is a need for increasing the religious literacy of government officials, as well as members of civil society and NGOs. It goes not only in respect to history, teachings, or practices of different world religions, but also with respect to how religions manifest themselves in different settings. In that direction, we will take a closer look at the negotiating process of the SDG 2030, as well as the religious teachings of Christianity and Islam that go in line with the sustainable development.

## **2. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENTAL GOALS 2030**

Sustainable development has been a goal for the humanity for a very long time. However, it was not until the end of 21. century when the national governments, supranational and international organizations started showing genuine interest for developing systematic approach toward this concept. The World Commission on Environment and Development defined the sustainable development as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (UNAI, 1987).

Since then, as a leading international organization, UN coordinates the process toward this desired course. The first steps were made by introducing the MDGs, covering the period 2000-2015. The next step began in 2012 when the process of discussion and negotiation on the SDGs started. So, the result was the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The Agenda is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity (UN, 2015). According to UN, eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge. One of the main factors contributing to the success of the Agenda is the partnership. And maybe this is the greatest improvement from the process of negotiating the MDG.

2030 Agenda consists of SDGs, also known as the Global Goals, adopted by the UN in 2015 as a universal call to action to end the poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity (UNDP, 2015). There are 17 SDGs and 169 targets, recognizing that steps and actions taken in one area will have an influence in other areas. It is envisioned that the goals and targets should balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: environmental, economic, and social.

What is very important here and what is considered major improvement from the past is the involvement of a very diverse actors in the process. Beside the governmental representatives, in the three years of consultation and negotiations, many representatives from the civil sector were included. Partnerships have been built with a huge number of organizations, entities, NGOs. All of them have been included because they can all contribute to this global action. It is considered that the consultation process on the SDGs is the largest ever held in the UN’s history. There have been different views on this process, including criticism on its effectiveness. There have been thoughts that the consultation process could have been extended to include even more actors and stakeholders. However, the general impression is that it represents significant improvement compared to the MDGs process.

Partnerships have been built even in the period before 2015, not only by the UN and within SDG negotiating process. It was a period of increased awareness about the importance of creating circumstances for transforming the world. Not only transforming, but also preserving. 2015 was a landmark year for the international policy: several major agreements were adopted. Among them, maybe the most important is the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

What is particularly important and what this paper aims to stress is the inclusion of religious and faith-based organizations. As Gerd Müller, the German Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development puts it: if we are to achieve the SDGs set out in the Agenda, we will need to change how we think and act at all levels. In the long term, this can only succeed if the partnerships we build include those who appeal not only to people’s minds, but who also move their hearts (Khushwant and Steinau-Clark, 2016). It is meant about the partnerships with religious actors and communities.

## **3. RELIGION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENTAL GOALS**

Partnership, as one of the main ideas in the 2030 Agenda, includes creating new alliances. It might require finding a balanced approach, trying to build bridges, trying to find a common language for a common good. As never before, the faith communities have been involved in the global negotiation and discussion process. It means that the world leaders finally begin to understand the potential of the religious feelings in shaping the world around us. But it hasn’t always been like this, and the emergence of the religion as one of the driving factors in the society began less than a century ago.

In its existence, the religion had gone through different periods. According to Haustein and Tomalin, while faith communities have endured and thrived the world over, a wave of modernist, secular social change has dominated development practice and discourse from the second half of the 20th century onwards (Haustein and Tomalin, 2019). The second half of the past century might be considered as relatively turbulent, when speaking about the

religion and its role in the society. The Cold War, the rise of the socialism, the “Islamic Awakening” wave, the Islamic Revolution and many more global events contributed to the re-emergence of the religion in the public life. Although the societies declare themselves secular, the religious feelings, institutions and fate-based organizations have enormous potential to influence different aspects of the social life.

Religion plays very important part in all societies. For the believers, very often it is very important source of values and norms. Religion very often influences people’s view on the world. It affects their lifestyles, the choices they make in life, whether they will engage in the community or not and many other decisions. For most of the believers, the entire world view is primarily shaped by their religion. Religious practices, beliefs and values are deeply intertwined in the daily lives of believers, while leaders of churches, mosques, temples and other religious communities play an important role in shaping attitudes, opinions, behaviors, and dealing with societal challenges (Blazhevski, Cacanaska&Grizhev, 2022).

All religions agree that there are issues such as poverty, discrimination or exclusion which make some members of the society particularly vulnerable. Recognizing them as social, humanitarian or even security concerns, religious institutions have always tried to help the vulnerable. During wars, during crisis or epidemics (as the most recent COVID-19 pandemic period), religion has shown care for the people in need.

The primary message of religions, especially Abrahamic, is a call for improvement and integration of the poor into society, as well as elimination of all obstacles and inequalities, enabling full individual development. Religious communities can have significant contribution toward ending extreme poverty. Leaving no one behind is a principle of all religions. An inclusive society for all is the ideal of each religion. On the way to this ideal society, religious communities address many other issues such as rights of women, youth and minorities, access to basic services for all, but also key issues our societies face such as poverty, pollution, exploitation, corruption and violence, which are all priorities for the new Agenda 2030.

Addressing such important social issues goes in line with the SDGs. It means that the efforts of the religious communities support the SDGs in their implementation. The first two goals, no poverty (end poverty in all forms everywhere) and zero hunger (end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, promote sustainable agriculture) clearly show that those issues have already been addressed by the religions in the past.

Already in 1993, the Parliament of World Religions declared the existence of a global ethic, under-pinned by two principles that can be found in all major religions: humanity (every individual has the right to be treated humanely) and reciprocity (we must treat others as we wish others to treat us – the Golden Rule) (Khushwant and Steinau-Clark, 2016). Those principles are entwined in the religious teachings of both Christianity and Islam, as will be briefly elaborated. Both religions, as we will see, stress in their religious teachings the importance of helping the poor and those in need.

#### **4. CHRISTIANITY**

Humanity in Christianity can best be seen through philanthropy, where the care for others and the humanity is emphasized. In philanthropy, as a value, its comprehensiveness is understood, above all, as an opportunity to express many other diverse moral values. In fact, there is no better reason and deeper justification for concrete, certain actions; there is no higher motive for the steps taken than philanthropy.

Christian love is spiritual love. This is what makes it different from physical love and from physical attractiveness, as well as from mental love, compassion, sympathy and in general from any emotional moods. Although love in Christianity is primarily portrayed as love of God, it is this love of God that entails general love, love for all His creations, and especially for human.

According to its manifestations, Christian love is comprehensive and inexhaustible. However, one of the most specific manifestations of that love are the manifestations of social love and love for one's neighbor.

Another form of manifestation of Christian love is charity. Charity to the hungry, thirsty, strangers, to all those in trouble and need. And of course, charity for the purpose of ending the poverty and hunger. In the Christianity, many believers see charity as a testimony of their faith. Just as many other Christian virtues, charity is not only shown with nice words and wishes: the one who truly loves his neighbor, when he sees him in trouble, he makes every effort to help him.

Britannica Encyclopedia defines philanthropy as voluntary organized efforts for socially useful purposes while charity, in Christian thought, is defined as the highest form of love, signifying the reciprocal love between God and man that is made manifest in unselfish love of one’s fellow men (Britannica). Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, on the other hand, defines philanthropy as “goodwill to fellowmen”; especially active effort to promote human welfare. Charity is viewed as “benevolent goodwill toward or love to humanity, generosity and helpfulness toward the needy or suffering...public provision for the relief of the needy” (Bowman, 2010). Philanthropy and charity, according to him are similar, but in common use charity places a greater emphasis on helping the poor. No matter

which definition or view we consider, apart from activities which aim at the happiness and benefit of believers, extending service to whole of society is regarded as of utmost importance. Without action, belief will be meaningless. It is in social action that faith becomes manifest and leads to social transformation

The Christian view, when speaking about philanthropy and charity is very clear, there is no distinction between the people. All people are intrinsically valuable in the eyes of God and worthy of dignity and respect, regardless of their living circumstances, beliefs, culture, gender, social or economic status (Khushwant and Steinau-Clark, 2016).

Care and compassion towards those in need is a fundamental part of Christianity. Care and compassion towards those in need is a fundamental part of Christianity. It gives voice to the voiceless. In the Old Testament, the prophets denounced the leaders of nations as shepherds who have failed the flocks entrusted to their care, since they have not “strengthened the weak, healed the sick, and bound up the injured” (Ezekiel 34:4). In the New Testament, Jesus tells his followers that those who are ill actually look after those who take care of them – and whoever fails to offer help stands condemned (Matthew 25).

## 5. ISLAM

Islam lays down the principle of social solidarity and mutual responsibility, as declared by Parliament of World Religions in 1993, in all its various shapes and forms. The religious teachings of Islam encourage believers to take care of other believers and help those in need. Those who have enough, have a social responsibility to help the ones that are in need. It means, Islam encourages the legitimate pursuit of wealth and the enjoyment of the bounties created for human fulfilment, in recognition that wealth is only one determinant of well-being (Muhtari&FitzGibbon, 2014). Individuals are merely trustees of the wealth bestowed on them by Allah. Islam considers wealth as the life blood of the community which must be in constant circulation; its possession therefore excludes the right to hoard it (Cipta, 2019, p.392). This implies that wealth must be invested to improve people’s well-being. Islam accepts unequal distribution of wealth, but it does not allow the existence of wide disparities and therefore gives those in extreme poverty a clear right over the wealth of anyone whose wealth exceeds subsistence level. The Holy Qur’an (51:19) says: “And in their wealth was given the right of the needy and deprived.”

Strong and irrefutable proof of human love, and the basic and most common manifestation of philanthropy in Islam is charity. Charity has one of the most important roles in the development of the community itself, because it is especially important for a person to spend everything he has earned and possessed not only on himself, but also on his parents, relatives, neighbors, the poor and the weak. Islam accepts as a true believer only one who is always ready, after satisfying the needs of his family, to help all those people who need his help. Islam, through charity, strives to achieve balance in the community, that is, it strives for general well-being. Because through charity everyone is allowed to feel the joy of life. What is specific about charity in Islam is that it applies to all those who need it. Guided by the basic principle of charity to help people, it includes all people, whether they are good or bad, whether they are on the right path or not, whether they are Muslims or not.

There are two forms of charity in Islam: obligatory and voluntary, i.e., zakat and sadaqah. To narrow the gap between the rich and the poor as well as to ensure just and equitable distribution of economic resources, Islam provides a suite of positive and prohibitive measures. These include zakat (obligatory almsgiving) and sadaqah (voluntary charity), as well as laws of inheritance and bequest, monetary atonements, and compulsory contributions in the form of taxes. Prohibitive measures include the abolition of interest, prohibition of acquisition of wealth through illegal and unfair means, and the prohibition of hoarding of wealth. (Khushwant and Steinau-Clark, 2016).

The word zakat is derived from the verb *zaka*, which in Arabic means growth and purity. Zakat cleanses the believer from sins. It also purifies the soul from a bad trait, stinginess. Zakat is the giving of a certain part of the property to a poor Muslim who needs it. Giving means the cessation of any use of that property by the person giving it, in the name of Allah. Zakat is the third of the pillars of the Islamic faith. The duty of giving zakat is established in the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and the consensus of Islamic scholars. In many verses Allah mentions zakat along with prayer. There is no duty that the Qur'an imposes more than charity. The obligation for zakat is categorical. He who avoids it is an unbeliever.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The paper examined part of the religious teachings of Christianity and Islam that reflect on UN’s 2030 Agenda. To make the world better place, under coordination of UN, the new millennium began with two initiatives: Millennium Development Goals (MDG) (2000-2015) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (2015-2030). Both processes included broad discussion and involvement of civil society representatives, each one contributing to the actions aimed at people, planet, and prosperity. SDG negotiation process, however, stressed the importance of the partnerships and allies. As never before, religious and faith communities were involved in the discussion and negotiation of the common problems humanity faces today. As 2030 Agenda requires, building bridges and creating

partnerships. Partnerships that contribute to the better tomorrow. Humanity, philanthropy, charity, zakat and sadaqah are just part of the contribution that religions offer toward achieving SDGs. Creating just societies without discrimination is the ideal that Christianity and Islam are preaching in their religious teachings. And reaching those is only possible by sustainable development: meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

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