"Global Sustainability – Science and Religion in Dialogue"

Paper proposal: How can theology contribute to our sustainability goals?

Keywords: sustainable systems; beliefs; values; function of religion; conscience.

Lluis Oviedo, Pontifical Antonianum University, Rome,
loviedo@antonianum.eu
Pontificia Università Antonianum, Via Merulana 124, 00185 Roma
Sara Lumbreras, IIT- Pontifical University of Comillas, Madrid
slumbreras@comillas.edu

1. Introductory remarks

Even if many religious leaders and theologians have assumed a decided commitment for environmental causes and sustainable development, some voices still ask what institutionalized religion and theology can provide to this issue. Indeed, some scepticism could be justified, since traditionally theology has not been concerned with the environment or sustainability. This is perhaps already a good point to start the discussion: whether some religions, and especially Christian faith, have historically been involved in issues related to sustainability, either in a positive or negative manner. From a sheer historical point of view, for instance, can we say that the Roman Empire as a complex and articulated system, was more sustainable than the model that Christian faith could inspire later and that needed many centuries to work? Moving to modern times, again the question arises about how much this faith could contribute to more sustainable social systems, considering the three essential dimensions such idea gathers: environmental, social issues, and governance.

As can be seen, the idea of sustainability provides a new heuristic to better understand the role and function of Christian churches, and their theological efforts. In any case, the issue does not concern so much our past, but the present and our future. In this sense, the question becomes more pressing: to what extent does Christian faith and theology contribute to a sustainable world system, highly complex and accounting for many involved factors and dimensions, perhaps beyond the reach of religious means. An answer can be found possibly when we pay more attention to the human factor involved – together with many others – in such complex system. It is obvious that the political, economic and technical issues move in a different area, but at the same time it is our conviction that ignoring the human factor would entail a short sight and a greater difficulty to tackle the general issue. Indeed, it is not just technical or political, but requires the engagement of the hearts and minds of all human subjects involved in that process. In this sense, we need to pay more attention to aspects like beliefs, values and attitudes that contribute to increase a sustainability conscience, and how religious faith can assist in encouraging such beliefs and values. Theology needs to engage in this task to connect our core traditions with such perceived needs and to show how much they need to be assumed in the articulation of a concrete theology of salvation, and not just one ideal and abstract soteriology.

2. The historical dimension

Sustainability has evolved into a broad program that encompasses environmental issues, social concerns, and governance. The idea is very intuitive: we can distinguish between more and less sustainable organizations, living styles and humanity as a whole. In all these cases, the distinction is applied to the present conditions but considering future states: the future development of such social entities deeply depend on the current conditions that will determine next stages. As can be appreciated, this concept and program entails a strong temporal dimension, in the sense that present and future are closely entrenched and are strongly interdependent: we design and improve current systems considering their future impact and durability; and those upcoming states, with their possibilities and limits will result from the choices made in an earlier stage, even some generations before.

A question arises concerning to what extent such heuristic model can be applied to the past evolution of societies and organizations, and how such model can become 'theologically informed'. Nothing prevents us from undertaking such an analysis, and actually it can reveal some hidden dimensions on the historical processes and forms of cultural evolution. We can even apply some kind of 'reverse-engineering' to reconstruct how some social forms and cultural expressions became more enduring and resilient despite many setbacks. This approach can become quite promising when trying to discern which cultural forms have assisted in building more resistant and sustainable systems, in contrast with those that failed in keeping with this main and elementary scope.

The proposed program could seem like a *deja vue*, or even tautology. Indeed, it is quite close to applying the evolutionary rule: survival of the fittest variations, which are revealed only a posteriori, when we can observe which evolutionary processes appear as more successful or better adapted. In the same vein as living entities struggling to reproduce and survive, social organizations and even entire populations can be described as bodies trying to survive in the long run despite changes in their environment. The main issue is in our case to what extent religions as social bodies, organizations, and cultural forms, are enduring and contribute to models of sustainable living.

The question is not secondary. Many will remember the old thesis of Lynn White, published in 1967, claiming that Judeo-Christian religion was hostile to the environment and became a main cause of ecological crises and unsustainable living styles, after breaking the unity between humans and natural world. This is not the only reading we can provide on this reality. In that version, the sustainability of Christian faith would be paid by an unsustainable model of nature's exploitation that was untenable in the long run. However, other interpretations can be conceived: the worst environmental conditions took place not as societies have reached the highest religious level, but when these societies have lost most of its religious intensity or when Christian influence has faded away according to many statistical figures. The ecological crisis has less to do with Christian faith and tradition and more with secularization, and possibly with what Max Weber called the 'iron cage' of modern rationality and development.

In any case, we feel that Christian history can be analysed now through the lenses of sustainability, being used as a kind of heuristics. In that sense, the question is whether that religious expression could encourage sustainable social models in the past, in each historical epoch. Just as a counter-factual mental experiment, we can imagine which alternative models, besides the Christian, could work like instead of the one that was dominant in Western areas. Truly, several episodes linked to wars, persecutions, and intolerance, are revealed to our eyes as counter-tenable, and indeed, they needed to be corrected in following stages to allow for a more sustainable model, for Christian institutions and for the entire societies in which they were inserted and interacting. In big strokes, we can hypothesize that Christian adaptability and cultural evolution reflected the need to engender interacting models able to ensure their own and the social survival, or – in other words – to the extent that Christian faith could be kept and adapted to new conditions, the entire social fabric could find some enforcement and correction to avoid its worst developments and crisis.

3. Theology and the future of humanity

The question formerly asked about a likely theological dimension in that perspective is legitimate; actually, theology has cared since its earlier times about that tension between present and future, in an absolute or ultimate sense. We could even say the relation between past, present and future transcends the material reality of human beings, and religion being the organized form of relation with the transcendent, sustainability should not be far from its core. From this point of view, the emphasis on sustainability could be read in both senses: as a further 'secularization' of the original Christian sensitivity and contents; and as a way to connect and pursue with such a future concern. In the first case, the current trends would mean a clear displacement of religious beliefs and theological analysis: the connection between present and future no longer belongs to religious faith or praxis, and still less to an engaging reflection based on ancestral promises, but on a more accurate, scientific, and technically based analysis able to highlight strengths and weaknesses in the current development, and to reveal future scenarios more or less bright or dark. What Christian Churches and theologians were doing for many centuries, now becomes a conscious task of those who assess risks, manage them, and can anticipate the outcomes from current trends in all possible areas. To the religious voices would be left the apocalyptic language and ideas, with some fuzzy hopes less connected to the real present conditions and more to some general fears or expectations, deeply rooted in our minds and cultures.

That is not the only possible version of the ongoing trends. It is apparent that Christian entities have lost the monopoly they once enjoyed in the management of an ultimate expected future. This is true not just regarding the studies that try to better anticipate future stands and conditions, and to design present systems able to avoid the worst consequences. In this dynamic resonates the traditional preaching, which often threatened the faithful with a catastrophic end if they did not convert. This discourse, and even this style, has been now assumed, in a secular vein, by those who warn about the big risks linked to climate change and other disastrous

processes linked to the surpassing of the Earth sustainable limits. But furthermore, the representation of an ultimate future has gone to the hands of scientific and technical experts, like those gathered in the *Future of Humanity Institute*, based in Oxford University, and with all the platforms and projects linked to transhumanist views. In this case, the future appears clearly brighter and more promising, in clear contrast with the dark doomsayers that wave the flag of climate change and other incoming disasters. The gap between these opposing views of the future is, by the way, rooted in values and attitudes and in particular the ones attached to technology. For the tecno-optimists, technology will surely develop a way out of every societal threat, including climate change. For tecno-pessimists, it is precisely technology which has led us to doomsday scenarios that now will be impossible to avoid.

Coming back to theology, there is a different approach, alternative to the secularization and religions *Aufhebung* (negation), is possible, one that considers a better collaboration between those two styles of future design and management. A possible approach is given by the social systems theory and the proposal to view religion as a system specialized in what Germans called *Kontingenz Bewaltigung*, or "coping with uncertainty" as Niklas Luhmann claimed. The future is always uncertain, and several social systems try to address what presents different degrees of unpredictability: politics, economy, science, education… Each system develops its own approach, for instance preventing instability, or providing means to cushion incoming shocks, or trying to better describe developments and their outcomes through statistical projections. Religious function and performance assume distinct versions: it can point to a radical change and the expectation of a transformative catastrophe, as has done the apocalyptic tradition; it can try to assuage anxieties and to hide the real danger; or it can encourage hope through an effective conversion that embodies the Gospel's values.

Probably, when we design more sustainable systems, religion can play a role, not so much as doomsayer, or soothing down fears arising from catastrophic and pessimistic announcements, but rather as a convincing platform calling to personal and collective responsibility, and that translates the traditional conversion demand in more environmental and social concerns. In this case the way religion tackles contingency or uncertainty is less by providing blind trust – God will always save us despite our bad behaviour – and more by calling to change our livestyles. The traditional invitation: "If you may not convert, even so will all you perish" (Lk 13, 3), resonates now as a call to assume attitudes more attuned with the need to preserve and assure a better future for all.

The suggested understanding implies a sort of convergence between the secular programs aimed at supporting sustainability in different social levels, on the one side; and the religious Christian program based on faith, hope and love, able to nourish concern together with the greatest expectations for our future, on the other. Combining both strands we could get a post-secularized model in which both instances – secular and religious – provide mutual meaning and enforcement for a common interest. This view suggests that a completely secular program could probably lack impulse and motivation, as Kant was observing in his moral philosophy, and more recently Habermas has highlighted in his attempts to make

sense of religion in advanced societies. This is important when we perceive the difficulty to convince a general population and political bodies about the need to assume alternative models of growth and living. In the other direction, the proposed interaction is needed too: without a scientifically informed input about projections and future outcomes, Christian faith, theology, and Churches at large, would be unable to reformulate their hopes, and to give a more accurate content to conversion appeals or even to assume a sustainable style as organizations.

4. The role of religion regarding beliefs and believing

We become more aware in the last few years about the central role that beliefs and values play in any process aimed at ensuring a future for all, and not just a part of the population segment (after all, social justice is also a requirement for the sustainability of a society). Beliefs play indeed a big role in all political processes. For instance, democracy stands or falls depending on how strong a population is convinced about its fairness, and the trust it places on its governing body. The same can be applied to other social processes, like the economy, the judicial system, interpersonal relationships, and even science: without enough levels of trust, shared values and beliefs, no social system can stand.

The described conviction becomes more pressing when we design sustainable systems. They require very complex interactions at different levels: material, technical, of management, economic and cultural. But a well-ingrained social system would hardly work if beliefs and values are neglected as secondary factors playing in this very entangled sets. Such a point is easy to observe when we notice that many people do not believe the scientific reports and studies warning about incoming disasters linked to climate change. Trust is required too when we are invited to change our living styles towards more fitting and less exploitative means, even at the expense of present sacrifices. Without ad hoc beliefs and values encouraging such an engagement, we cannot expect that a society will commit on limiting emissions or consuming in a moderate way.

Now, the issue is whether religions and especially Christian faith can play a role at instructing how to believe in the right way. We are aware about many vices and biases that distort the believing process, and how difficult it becomes to believe in the right way. Here we find another case for which theology and science need to join their efforts and their specific competences: theology is in the right place to discern about constructive and destructive beliefs - or, as applying the heuristic defined above, beliefs that are conductive to sustainable systems and beliefs that perpetuate unsustainable ones-, after long experience and a tradition covering many centuries. Science can provide the means to distinguish between right and wrong beliefs inside a proper range. Our proposal is that, after assuming the central role beliefs and values play at building sustainable societies and cultures; and after verifying the difficulties to overcome negative biases, theology and science might be perceived as right partners in that task, a needed synergy able to build a better, sustainable future.