

THE FORMULATION OF A SOCIETAL VALUE SYSTEM FOR BIOS IN THE NEXT MILLENNIUM

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Introduction

Formulating a societal value system for the conservation of the bio-environment in the next millennium is a challenging proposition. It is a challenge that has to be met in the context of the level of popular understanding, attitudes of mind, prevailing values and the interplay of natural and man-made forces in the contemporary world complicated by the fears, hopes, emotions and passions that motivate the actions of modern man. Where emotions and passions are concerned, particularly propensity to aggressive behaviour, it can be said that modern man, judging by his responses and reactions to life situations, is cast in the same mould as his primitive forebears.

There have been and are in evidence today cases of humanism exemplified by the lives and thoughts of great thinkers and in the lives of those who have down the ages followed in their wake. But the religious and political ideologies derived from the often subjective and sectarian interpretations of their systems of thought have split up societies into mutually antagonistic groups. In working out a synthesis of values that is to guide the destinies of man in the next thousand years it is incumbent on all right thinking persons to work collectively to chart out a futuristic course based on ancient, medieval and modern thought. Incidentally millennium means, in the biblical sense, a coming period of peace and happiness for all the earth. In this exploratory exercise an attempt is made to meet the challenge, taking as the starting point the apparently irreconcilable and contradictory beliefs that have generated so much animosity among contending religious, racial and political factions into which the human race finds itself unfortunately divided today.

We are concerned above all with the preservation of bios through the scientific management of the bio-environment. The nature of the environmental concerns that threaten the stability and future of bios have been clearly enunciated by individuals, government and by multilateral agencies both within and outside the United Nations system. Action has been taken in relation to such issues as the extinction of species, threat to plant genetic resources, population explosion, poverty, global warming etc. through legislation in the form of municipal law and international conventions, to give effect to policies leading to sustainable development. But the success achieved as a result of these policies and administrative action arising from them have not had a sufficiently far-reaching impact on major environmental issues that continue to baffle solution.

Each one of these concerns has deep-seated ethical and philosophical implications pertaining to life, its origin, nature and purpose and to the facts and conjectures regarding the pre-history, history and future of man on the planet. Any attempt to solve environmental problems without a clear understanding by all of the underlying realities will be a self-defeating exercise.

The purpose of this presentation is to give a layman's, not an expert's, view of the fundamental underlying principles, an objective understanding of which is essential if a viable solution to the problems confronting bios is to be found.

Idealism and materialism

Our objective as hinted at above is to reconcile the supposedly irreconcilable. Let us begin with two views regarding the meaning of history. There is a school of thought that sees history as the unfolding over time in material, institutional, spiritual, cultural and philosophical forms the evolving consciousness of man. We have come to accept this theory as the idealist interpretation of history as opposed to the materialist view which holds that society develops from stage to stage through the clash of contradiction and interests between the owners of the means of production and those who own nothing but labor power and who produce goods and services needed by the community as a whole. However unprecedented and largely unforeseen developments in the recent past and in the contemporary world scene have made it necessary to re-examine these assumptions, particularly in relation to ongoing changes in the field of political economy. Whether we accept one view or the other, the time-tested dialectical method of taking the former as the thesis and the latter as the antithesis will help us to arrive at a new synthesis incorporating the positive aspects of both and thereby bring nearer to realisation the formulation of a new set of values for the protection of the bio-system in the next millennium. To see the two theories in the correct perspective it is necessary to go back to the point in time when matter in evolution produced the chemical combinations that constituted the building blocks of the first living cell which after millions of years culminated in the evolution of the mind.

The evolution of life spontaneously from non-living matter is a scientifically established fact and no longer the subject of heated controversy but accepted as such by theologians of repute such as like Teilhard de Chardin, the renowned paleontologist. In his book *The Phenomenon of Man* he accepts the Darwinian theory. But unlike Darwin he sees evolution as the unfolding of a divine purpose. The imprimatur for the publication of the book though given long after his death, supports the view that the Vatican is coming round to the acceptance of a theory long rejected by the Church. In this context it is pertinent to recall the vehemence of the opposition to the Copernican theory at the time it was enunciated and the eventual acceptance of the heliocentric view. It is significant that the acceptance of these revolutionary positions has not had a negative impact on the influence of the church or diminished the faith of its adherents. This apparent contradiction can be explained by the ascending level of the comprehension of objective reality by the evolving consciousness of man gradually gaining control over matter and material forces within which it was originally conceived. As will be shown later the concept of evolution and creation are basically not in contradiction with each other.

The primacy of matter in time is therefore no longer a bone of contention between scientists and a growing body of theologians. Nevertheless, we cannot infer from the primacy of matter in time the supremacy of material conditions of life in determining, to the exclusion of other factors, the course and direction of human affairs. To understand the validity and significance of this contention we have to trace very briefly the process by which the brain and the mind developed in size and complexity in response to external stimuli arising from changes in the physical environment.

The evolution of the mind

The ancestors of modern man made their appearance according to fossil records in what is now South Africa about 3 million years ago. Named *Australopithecus afarensis* - the earliest hominid capable of bipedal locomotion - it had a brain size of about 300 millilitres. Though not in the direct line of descent, *Homo sapiens* probably evolved from *A. Afarensis*. *Afarensis robustus* and *Afarensis boisei* - with a geological age of between 1.5 to 2 million years - are believed to have used bone tools for digging. The capacity of the reconstructed brain measured 530 ml. The leap forward in evolution came with *Homo habilis*, nicknamed handy man. With him we see the use of bone tools and the beginnings of ritual and culture. The material for the stone tools, it has been established, was transported from distant places suggesting social organisation and the ability to think and act rationally. The bulge in the speech area of the *habilis* brain is evidence that he had the neurological equipment for rudimentary speech. *Homo erectus* with a geological age of 1.5 million years had a brain size of about 1000 ml. With him commences the movement out of the ancestral home due, probably, to growth of population. Conjectures about the origin of *Homo sapiens* are now pushed back 250,000 to 500,000 years with the discovery of a complete skull in a village near Thessalonika in Greece.

Homo sapiens Neanderthal held sway about 130,000 years ago. Their large brains - about the size of modern man's - helped to adapt to extreme cold and for turning out better tools and weapons. They buried their dead and there is evidence that they propitiated spirits and believed in life after death. They anticipated the Pharaohs in the practice of burying food, tools and weapons with the bodies of the dead. In 1868 several anatomically perfect skeletons were found in Cro Magnon, France. With a geological age of 35,000 years, Cro Magnon man, as he came to be called, cooked in stone pots, made well-turned out tools and their women wore ivory ornaments.

This story of man has been painstakingly reconstructed from fossil records found in South Africa, East Africa, France, Germany, China, Java by brilliant paleontologists such as M. Bird, Raymond Dart, Kamoya Kimie, W. C. Pei, Mary D. Leakey, Louis B. Leakey and their son Richard who in 1972 unearthed in Kenya a skull which when reconstructed he described "as almost certainly the oldest completed skull of early man" with a geological age of 2.6 million years.

Inferences from the evolution of the brain

This brief recapitulation of the evolutionary process seeks to highlight the correlation between the growth of the size of the brain from 300 ml to 1350 ml and the development of the mindöconsciousnessöevidenced by the progressively advancing techniques devised to satisfy human needs. Man begins for reasons of survival to speculate about his own self and the nature of the physical environment. He learns to generalise, conceptualise and extrapolate on the basis of observed phenomena. There is also evidence of graduation from self regarding to other regarding conduct. This is seen in isolated instances of primitive man's care for the agedöa sentiment which is inferred from the presence of skeletons in widely dispersed burial sites. This behaviour is of a higher order than the natural and instinctive love of mother to the offspring and a pointer to the extra-material, not to say spiritual, direction taken by the human mind at a particular stage in evolution. Another significant development occurs when the brain grows to cope with changes in the environment. This is purely a material reaction but produces a corresponding change in intelligent behaviour more than proportionate to the change in the size and complexity of the brain, thus making it possible for the mind to subvert material forces by its will to achieve a higher moral purpose.

No longer the passive subject of evolution like species lower down the evolutionary scale man now stands poised to gain mastery over the physical world around him. Movements and institutions developed by him no doubt exert a powerful influence on his individual and collective life, but the mind has the potential to exercise an overriding influence on forces and institutions of his own creation. The mind has acquired the ability to circumvent what is supposed to be historically and materially determined. This is the high water mark in the evolutionary process

from hominid to homo sapiens spanning a period of 3 million years.

Of this period what is euphemistically called civilisation is a mere six thousand years old. On this computation, the struggle of the mind of man to gain control over his primitive passions and instincts is yet in its infancy. This is borne out by the stone-age mentality that manifests itself in the brutalities committed by man today upon others of his own kind motivated largely by highly subjective beliefs. It is not a far cry from the internecine conflicts at the dawn of civilisation and conflicts on a very much larger scale of inhumanity in the twentieth century. We are to all intents and purposes in a state of nature depicted by the English philosopher Hobbes in his book *The Leviathan*, where life was "nasty, brutish and short." Man is supposed to have established civil society through a social contract to end the internecine strife of each against all. In this context the Charter of the United Nations is the latest in a series of social contracts imagined and formulated as such to establish a global society based on natural law and justice.

Dualism and monism

The belief that in the ultimate analysis mind and body are mutually exclusive finds expression in the dualistic as opposed to the monistic view of the nature of life and the universe. We are accustomed to think in terms of dualities such as natural and supernatural, mind and body, spiritual and material, divine and human as opposite categories with the former in each case subordinate and external to the latter. On the contrary the monistic school sees these dualities essentially as unities. It sees the cosmos as a unity of the infinitely small and the infinitely great—the micro-cosmos and the macro-cosmos. Failure to reconcile this apparent dichotomy between monism and dualism is responsible for the needless acrimonious rivalry that is evident in the relations between adherents at popular level of these two schools of thought descending at times to the repression of one by the other.

Studies by anthropologists have shown that the progression from animism and fetishism to polytheism, from polytheism to monotheism were but stages in the evolution of consciousness from hominid to homo sapiens. With every step forward in the evolution of man the concept of what constitutes the divine has undergone an upward qualitative change. Many theologians are coming round to the view that divinity is something to be sought within man and goes hand in hand with the emotion of love expanding, slowly from the love of self to love of family, tribe, race and ultimately an all-embracing love of humanity in the most enlightened among us. Of the sages of the past the Buddha is the acme of this all-pervading truth. He placed man in the very centre of the picture and saw in the will of man impelled by love and respect for life in all its forms the path to salvation. Christ speaks of himself as the son of man. That "the kingdom of heaven is within you" is the very essence of Christ's teaching. In Islam the brotherhood of man and the complete absence of caste and race in human relations are fundamental tenets of the creed. The quintessence of Hindu thought exemplified by Sankaracharya's interpretation of the Upanishads has the potential divinity of man as its central principle. Concealed in the core of all teachings lies the synthesis that we seek through a core to core dialogue.

Herbert Spencer who drew metaphysical conclusions from the work of Charles Darwin uses "evolutionary biology as a clue to metaphysical generalisations." He speaks of an external independent reality which he calls the "Unknowable". In his view "the reconciliation of science and religion will finally be reached when scientists and scientific philosophers acknowledge that the ultimate mystery of existence cannot be penetrated by methods of positive science and when proponents of religions give up the attempt to explain the existence of things by reference to a Being whose nature they cannot know." Spencer regarded all positive knowledge as limited to observable phenomena appearing in space and time. But he did not limit reality to what appears to science alone. It is a well-known fact that by a combination of observation, introspection, intuition and insight without the benefit of technology it is possible to draw scientifically valid conclusions about the nature of the objective world. This is borne out by Buddhist cosmology and the surprisingly scientific astronomical speculations of the ancient Greeks. According to Christian belief man became divine through love. In man the emotion is the product of evolution. We find it like a thread running through human society from the primitive right up to modern times at all levels and in every social system in history.

Evolution and creation

The dichotomy between the concept of evolution and creation is the other impediment to the establishment of harmonious forward-looking relations between protagonists of these two schools of thought. We have seen how with the evolution of human consciousness man's understanding of his own nature, of the environment and of the universe, has progressed from animism to the view now slowly gaining ground that divinity lies within man. After three million years of evolution man, hitherto the subject of evolution, has reached a point when he has acquired the power to give evolution a purpose and a sense of direction willed by himself. The marvels of bio-technology culminating in the cracking of the genetic code have given man the awe-inspiring power of creation. We are slowly unravelling the mystery of "who we are, where we came from and where we are headed." Bio-technology and genetic engineering are the new tools and techniques of the twentieth-century man. The difference from the stone age tools is not merely a matter of degree. There is something more significant. The new tools with their potential place a tremendous moral responsibility on those who use them. It is at this point that we need the guidance of the theologian and the clergy in general. They have to make common cause with the scientist.

The relative nature of civilisation's duration on the geological time scale

Accustomed as we are to think of six thousand years as a very long span of time we find it difficult to comprehend the reasons for the aggressive nature of man. We fail to realise that six thousand years is a drop in the ocean of time. On the geological time scale of 4,500 million years man has been on this planet for only 30 seconds when reduced to a twenty-four hour time scale. The period of civilisation is one tenth of a second! Barring a cosmic catastrophe mankind can survive for thousands of millennia to come as the only animal species in the planet that has begun to take control over its own destiny. But some paleontologists have expressed the fear that no mammalian species have survived longer than 3 million years. Whatever the veracity of this prognostication may be, the urgency of the need to work out a synthesis cannot be overemphasised.

Technology and social change—the moral dimension

In paving the way to sustainable development technology must play a positive role. Hitherto progress in this field has been more than offset by the shortsighted utilisation of non-renewable resources to the detriment of future generations evidenced by such baneful consequences, particularly the proliferation of conventional and nuclear weapons of mass destruction and those mentioned earlier in this presentation.

In the preceding analysis we have discussed the nature of the synthesis that has to be worked out between conflicting ideologies vis-a-vis the nature of man and the purpose of existence. Currently prevailing value systems have only succeeded in estranging the already fragmented human society and have in the process unleashed forces that have been environmentally disastrous. It is therefore imperative that scientists, theologians and philosophers in general make a long, objective, dispassionate appraisal of current beliefs, practices and trends as a prelude to the formulation of a rational value system to guide humanity in the next millennium. Ideological differences must be bridged if self-destruction through war or environmental degradation is to be prevented. Bios cannot stand the strain of any more conflicts be they local, regional or global. The behaviour of matter within the micro-cosmos and macro-cosmos is predictable. Mind, as the derivative of matter at the highest point of evaluation in acting upon matter, attempts to understand its laws and to guide natural forces according to a predetermined plan. Determining the course and direction brings up the question of moral responsibility. Is a particular course of action morally defensible in the context of the synthesis discussed in the foregoing? As clearly enunciated in the goals of the International University of the Bio-Environment (I.U.B.E.), the overall objective is the creation of a synthesis leading to a harmonious global society. It is only on the basis of a synthesis discussed above that the correct motivation for the protection of the bio-environment must be sought.

Meeting the challenge - a new approach to education

The task of educating the people to accept and conform to a new value system is a challenging one more difficult than the formulation of such a system. Old ways are deeply ingrained and minds operate at different levels of intelligence. The Buddha faced this dilemma. He doubted whether the path he discovered could be understood by the mundane but eventually decided to teach all the path to the liberation of the mind.

During the millennia that have elapsed since the first hominid began to reflect the brain and mind have developed to higher and higher levels of consciousness. The process continues gathering momentum. The ability of each successive generation to grasp abstract and complex concepts better than the preceding generation bears this out. Therefore abstract concepts at present discussed only among the intellectual elite must become the common knowledge of all. But as there are different levels of comprehension the concepts must be simplified and made intelligible to the common man. Towards this end the education system will have to be restructured to accommodate the new thinking at every level.

It is recorded by Plato in *The Republic* that when Glaucon questions Socrates whether the perfect state would be established, he replied that for such a consummation there should be a union between wisdom and power in the person of a philosopher king. Plato laid down in great detail the curriculum and methodology for the training of future rulers. The subjects given pride of place were gymnastics, music inclusive of literature, arithmetic, geometry and astronomy. What is significant is that he insisted on the integrated approach to learning as a philosophical principle. Referring to the education of the Guardians, he observes: "These must gather together into one connected view all the studies which they followed without order in their education in childhood, to disclose the relationship of studies of one another and to the nature of the real being." In the Greece of Socrates and Plato, educationists were concerned with the training of future Guardians drawn from the intellectual elite. Hence it was considered superfluous to extend the same education and training to the plebians. But in a modern democratic state where the people are sovereign it is imperative that we "educate our masters" as the Greeks sought to educate their future rulers. However the limiting factor in popularising philosophy of all subjects is the use of terminology like eschatology, teleology etc. where simpler expressions could be used to make the underlying principles meaningful to a person of average intelligence. Philosophy in its widest sense deals with problems of everyday life and who more than the common man needs a philosophy of life as a guide to effective living?

Another limiting factor is the methodology currently in use. What is taught is not the dialectical method used by the thinkers to elucidate and resolve problems but the history of philosophy. H.G. Wells puts this succinctly in his book *First and Last Things*: "We do not bring the young up against the broad elemental questions that are the questions of metaphysics, the questions that provide the basis for clear thinking. We do not make the young mind discuss, correct and elucidate it. That was the way of the Greeks and we worship the divine people far too much to

adopt their ways. No, we lecture to them not about philosophy but about philosophers!"

We have reached a point in the evolution of our species when physical evolution has reached level ground. From now on the evolutionary process is destined to further develop the potential of the mind. Hence mind training should be an integral part of the new strategy for education. Man is now poised to take control over his own destiny. With instantaneous global communication in the coming decades mankind will be drawn still closer together. "The world is folding in upon itself. The concept of the global village presupposes a global consciousness. Philosophers and historians are now talking of the end of history and the end of ideology and the emergence of a universal homogeneous state. Hence the need is to develop a system of education, both formal non-formal, leading to clear unbiased thinking. It must be emphasized at this point that the prerequisite for the training of the mind is a sound body. Hence the need to give the highest priority to health and nutrition.

Conclusion

It is appropriate to conclude this presentation with a quotation from the summary of The Republic translated by the well-known classical scholar W.H.D. Rouse - a quotation that provides much food for thought revealing as it does the responsibility of the philosophy and the nature of the intellectual ferment that prevailed in the contemporary world and the influence of Eastern thought on the Greek mind:

"Socrates in the story of the cave illustrates the escape of the philosopher from the fetters and darkness of the physical world of the senses to the dazzling brilliance of the world of the mind. But he says that the philosopher must afterwards return to the cave to enlighten those who are imprisoned below."

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