The Theocentric Worldview: Sustainability Education for Religion and Spiritual

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Abstract

Several recent studies started to relate religious beliefs and sustainable behavior. For this reason, there is a high possibility that students' religious beliefs can be a strong impetus for practicing sustainability knowledge. The education for sustainable development (ESD) in universities should not be separated from the meaningful religious belief of university students. Therefore, we proposed the theocentric worldview which centered on a religion-spiritual relationship with God to be included as a part of ESD. This worldview is important in making ESD content meaningful for religious university students. In this paper, we used a religion-spiritual concept from Islamic teachings as an example of how a religious belief can be embedded within ESD for university students.

A. Introduction

Education for sustainable development (ESD) is a concept that continues to be important and relevant for higher education institutions such as universities. It is the agenda of the United Nation to promote environmental awareness through the implementation of ESD at higher educational institutions including universities. However, some hindrances prevent universities from implementing their full potential in ESD. For example, misconceptions that sustainability is: not a subject per se, too theoretical, too broad, and simply a fashion, serve as excuses for not implementing sustainability education in universities (Walter Leal Filho, 2000). Therefore, some authors had focused the discussions on ESD in universities into its pedagogical aspects such as lecturers' beliefs on appropriate pedagogies in teaching sustainability development (Cotton, et.al., 2007), the importance of critical thinking in pedagogy for education related to sustainability (Thomas, 2009), how deep learning can foster interdisciplinary understanding in sustainable development (Warburton, 2003), how role-playing can contribute to a deeper understanding of sustainability education in university level (Vatalis, 2017), and how a whole-of-university approach can be implemented towards sustainability (Mahmud, et.al., 2019). Nevertheless Leal Filho et al. (2018) found that the transformations of higher education institutions in terms of the process or changes in reforming the sustainable-oriented curriculum are not sufficiently integrating the concept of sustainable development.

There is a possibility of a missing link between knowing that ESD is important and implementing ESD in universities. In searching for the gap between knowing and implementing sustainability development, some studies attempted to link sustainability with religion and spirituality. For example, Tucker and Grim (2001) proposed that religion can contribute to the emergence of broader environmental ethics and advocate reverence for the earth and its profound cosmological processes. In his literature review on the relationships between environment and religion, one of Sponsel (2010) conclusions is that religion has its role in defining a place of human beings in nature and in giving spiritual, moral,

and cultural meanings and values. In solving the issue of sustainability development, Leal Filho et al. (2019) emphasizes that "…neither an approach focusing only on the economy, politics or regulations, nor a separated religious, ethical or moral approach can solve the environmental challenges today and tomorrow alone" (p.617).

The focus of this paper is to propose that students in universities should be allowed to receive ESD that is religiously and spiritually meaningful for them. As claimed by Leal Filho et al. (2019), the problem of environmental challenges cannot be solved by separating it from religious, ethical, and moral aspects. Similarly, the problem of implementing ESD in universities cannot be solved by having pedagogical approaches that are separated from the religious, ethical, and moral beliefs of university students, especially students that consider themselves to be religious and spiritual. Muñoz-García and Villena-Martínez (2020) found different correlations between sustainable behavior and different conceptions of religion and spirituality (image of God, religious orientations, and religio-spiritual expressions) that are complicated. They suggested the need to consider aspects related to religio-spiritual meaning and content in addition to explicit expressions of religion and spirituality (Muñoz-García & Villena-Martínez, 2020). In this paper, we focus on how a certain content based on a religious and spiritual belief in Islamic perspective can be directly related to contents that are meaningful for sustainability knowledge in life.

In proposing religious and spiritual beliefs to facilitate ESD, we cannot ignore the claim made by White (1967) in blaming religions of the Judeo-Christian tradition as the root of the ecological crisis. Therefore, the first part of this paper discusses the root cause of our ecological crisis where we argue that the problem of implementing sustainability education has its roots, not in religion as claimed by White (1967), but in secularism. The second part of this paper focuses on the suggestion to make ESD contents meaningful for religious and spiritual students by including the concept of religio-spiritual relationship with God in addition

to the list of ESD worldviews[1] outlined by Sauvé (2005). In our suggestion, we use the concept of religio-spiritual relationship with God from Islamic teachings as an example. Such a concept not only consistent with the deep ecology movement but also serves as an example of how a religious and spiritual belief can be embedded within ESD contents for university students.

B. Method

This conceptual paper explores the importance of the religio-spiritual relationship with God as a concept to be integrated into ESD. Using the library research as a research methodology, secondary sources including books and journal articles available and relevant to the study were used. Based on the analysis from the sources, the ideas in visualizing the religio-spiritual with God as a concept were critically reviewed and developed stand on: the work of Naess (1986) and his deep ecology movement, Sauvé (2005) worldview in environmental education, and the religio-spiritual concept form Islamic teachings by Al-Attas (1993), Ammar (2001), Setia (2007) and Khalid (2010). Using the religio-spiritual concept from the Islamic perspective as an example, we propose ecological sustainability from a theocentric worldview where God is the center of the ESD. This worldview not only consistent with the deep ecology movement but also serves as an example of how a religious and spiritual belief can be embedded within ESD contents for university students.

C. Result and Discussion

The first phase in this analysis is refuting the claim made by White (1967) in blaming religions of the Judeo-Christian tradition as the root of the

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[1] The original term used by Sauvé (2005) is "current" referring to "to a general way of envisioning and practicing environmental education…[each] comprises a plurality and diversity of propositions…a single proposition (an approach, a model, a strategy, a program, an activity, etc.) may be associated with two or three different currents, according to the angle from which it is analyzed." (p.12). In this paper, however, we decided that "worldview" referring to "a paradigm by which the individual or the group interprets reality and acts upon life" (Abi-Hashem, 2020,p.2533).

ecological crisis. We argue that the problem has its roots, not in religion, but secularism. The second phase is connecting the deep ecology movement by Naess (1986) with Islamic teachings. Four Islamic concepts concerning environmental ethics were outlined based on Ammar (2001), Setia (2007), and Khalid (2010) in relating the Islamic teachings and the deep ecology movement. Finally, the third phase is proposing the suggestion to make ESD contents meaningful for religious and spiritual students by including the religio-spiritual relationship with God as another worldview in addition to the list of ESD worldviews outlined by Sauvé (2005).

1. Secularism as the Historical Roots of Ecological Crisis

White (1967) claimed that we are all living in "the post-Christian age" where we continue to live by Christian axioms that "no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes" (p.1205). He centralized his argument against this axiom and claimed that religious teachings with such axiom are the root of our ecological crisis. As a conclusion for his article, White (1967) called for a rejection of the axiom and embrace an alternative Christian view based on the ecocentric doctrine of Saint Francis who believes in the equality of all creatures including human beings. White's conclusion that our ecological crisis has its roots in religious traditions, including Islamic traditions, had been refuted by several other scholars (Kula, 2001; Minteer & Manning, 2005; Whitney, 2015).

In Islamic teachings, the axiom that nature has no purpose except to serve man's purpose is also known as the concept of *taskhir* where nature has been constrained by God to render service and benefit for human beings (Setia, 2004). However, the concept of *taskhir* in Islam does not lead to the exploitation of the natural world because the divine subjugation of nature is metaphysical where the purpose of man is to recognize, acknowledge, and glorify the Creator of nature (Setia, 2004). Therefore, in Islamic teachings, the complete axiom criticized by White (1967)should be as follows: nature has no purpose except to serve man's purpose, and man's purpose is to know the Creator. The Islamic explanation of the complete axiom can be understood from the words of Al-Attas (1993):

The Holy Quran declares in no uncertain terms that the whole of nature is as it were a great, open Book to be understood and interpreted. The Holy Quran also says that those among mankind who possess intelligence, insight, understanding, discernment, knowledge, know the meaning of that Book, for nature is like a book that tells us about the Creator…Nature has cosmic meaning and must, because of its symbolical connection with God, be respected. (p. 38)

With such an interpretation of the axiom, nature has an important meaning to Muslims as something sacred, respected, and meaningful. Even on a battlefield during wartime, Islam teaches its adherents not to harm the environment (Köylü, 2004).

According to Al-Attas (1993), secularization had caused the disenchantment of nature where nature was reduced to mere objects to be utilized by human beings. In addition, secularization had also caused the deification of human beings where knowledge and power are free from any religious prescription. As a result, human beings are free to construct their meaning of nature and will always open to the possibility of justifying their excessive utilization of nature as necessary for the "betterment" of humanity. Therefore, we claim that the root of our ecological crisis is neither Islam nor Christianity, but the combination of both technological advancement and the process of secularization throughout the 19th century. Not only this combination had resulted in our ecological crisis, but it also affected our educational orientation in universities. The effect of secularism on education is substantial in a way that it removes any educational content related to religious beliefs, including contents that give meaning to our relationship with nature. Therefore, the secularization of universities is a form of reduction that occurred in two aspects:

a. Educational aims in universities remain within the boundary of job marketability and material gains.
b. Educational assessments are limited within the boundary of empirical evidence and disregard any metaphysical contents such as spirituality.

As a consequence of these reductions in universities, the products of higher education are those who realize the importance of environmental values but remain within what Naess (1986) described as the shallow ecology movement. The worldview of those in the shallow ecology movement focuses on how human knowledge, technologies, policies, and other activities can minimize the damage to the environment while at the same time maximizing material gain through the exploitation of natural resources. For this reason, Naess (1973) initiated the deep ecology movement, which is compatible with religious and spiritual teachings from an Islamic perspective.

2. Deep Ecology and Islamic Teachings

Deep ecology views humanity and the natural environment as essentially interdependent (Naess, 1973, 1986, 2015). This is especially evident in Naess's concepts of biospheric egalitarianism and symbiosis. Central to these concepts is the view that both human beings and other life forms have the right to survive (Devall & Sessions, 1985; Naess, 1973, 1986, 2015; Obasa & Adebule, 2017). The ontological assumption on which these premises are based is that nature is not something from which human beings can separate themselves (Huckle, 2014; Kober, 2013; Naess, 1973). Therefore, deep ecology can be seen as a call to protect and respect the environment for its intrinsic value, not simply, or solely, for its usefulness to the human species (Kober, 2013).

A key distinction within deep ecology is the difference between shallow and deep approaches. When the term was first introduced, the concept of shallow ecology was deemed to refer to narrow environmental problems that focus on environmental pollution and resource depletion (Drengson, Devall, & Schroll, 2010; Naess, 1973s). It is, as Naess has pointed out, a system based on ecological principles with an emphasis on the benefit for human beings (Jacob, 1994; Naess, 1986; Muluk, S., & Habiburrahim, H., 2018)). Also, it aims for short-term and quick technical solutions (Naess, 2015). Devall and Sessions (1985) and Huckle (2014) argue that those living in technocratic-industrial societies are unavoidably anthropocentric because

of the way their lifestyles are fundamentally separated from the natural environment. These critiques show the limitations of shallow ecology principles because they do not require fundamental changes to the values and practices of individuals nor the transformation of society (Drengson et al., 2010; Jacob, 1994).

Deep ecology, in contrast, involves deep questioning, which involves proper judgment to decide what is right or wrong in certain circumstances. It challenges narrow anthropocentric conceptions of personal and human values, beliefs, and practice by considering the fundamental relationship between nature and humanity as an ethical position in which to consider what might be right and what might be wrong (Drengson et al., 2010; Naess, 1986, 2015). It is a philosophical position that looks for long-term solutions for human-nature problems (Naess, 2015). Naess (1986) provides an example to distinguish between the two. Concerning environmental pollution, Naess (1986) claimed that those who take a deep approach would seek to deal with the root causes of the problem although the process could be time-consuming, while those who take a shallow approach may simply export polluting industries to other countries. Polluting industries usually are industries that produce exports by relocating pollution-intensive goods to p, the universe, and God, and how they translate into ecological ethics and actions are "deep"(Ammar, 2001). It requires deep questioning through explorations about the values and the contradictions inherent around them. The conclusion of the deep questionings on the relationships we suggest could be grounded by four Islamic concepts concerning environmental ethics outlined by Khalid (2010): 1) the concept of *Tauhid* or Unity, 2) the concept of *Fitra* or Creation, 3) the concept of *Mizan* or Balance, and finally, 4) the concept of *Khalifah* or Responsibility. Similar concepts can also be found in Ammar (2001) and Setia (2007) who attempted to relate Islamic teachings and the deep ecology movement.

First, the concept of *Tauhid* or Oneness of God which is central to Islamic teachings explains the relationship between creations and God as the Creator while at the same time does not make the creations something

divine (Ammar, 2001). This is something different from the concept of ecocentric which tends to elevate the place of nature into something divine. The separation between God as the Creator and nature as creations does not relegate nature to the secular nor profane; rather, the separation creates a notion of deep relationship where intrinsic goodness of nature reflects the sacredness, glory, and power of the Creator (Ammar, 2001). Therefore, the concept of *Tauhid* confirms the interconnectedness of the natural order when everything is believed to be created by and belongs to God (Khalid, 2010). Those who practice the principle of *Tauhid* are described by Setia (2007) as those who walk upon the earth modestly[2]; while those who did not practice the principle of *Tauhid* are those who walk with pertness in the land[3]. The former possesses the quality of gentleness to nature and peacefulness to people due to their devotion to God as the Owner of all the creations; on the other hand, the latter are those who seek domination by imposing themselves with a false sense of superiority with no sense of self-restraint or accountability to God as the True Owner of all the creations (Setia, 2007).

Second, the concept of *Fitra* or creation is addressing God as the Creator of the universe. According to Setia (2007), the earth is not only for human beings but also for nature and all things in their state of *Fitra* (natural state). The word *Fitra* can be found in the Quranic verse which states that we should not alter the nature (framed) of Allah, in which He hath created, man[4]. In the translation of this verse, both words nature and created using similar Arabic word فطر (*Fitra*) which means to split or create (Penrice, 1873). Its concept in this verse is explained by Ali dan Leaman (2007) as 1) the nature of creation itself as created by God, and 2)

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[2] Based on the Holy Quran verse 25:63 which states "*The (faithful) slaves of the Beneficent are they who walk upon the earth modestly, and when the foolish ones address them answer: Peace;*".

[3] Based on the Holy Quran verse 31:18 which states "*Turn not thy cheek in scorn toward folk, nor walk with pertness in the land. Lo! Allah loveth not each braggart boaster*".

[4] Based on the Holy Quran verse 30:30 which states "*So set thy purpose (O Muhammad) for religion as a man by nature upright - the nature (framed) of Allah, in which He hath created man. There is no altering (the laws of) Allah's creation. That is the right religion, but most men know not –*".

the role of humanity within the creation, which is also considered as nature. Therefore, the concept of *Fitra* includes both the creation of the ecological system as something natural and the predisposition to do good and to submit to the will of God as something natural in human beings. The creation in its state of *Fitra* is always in a dynamic balance and in its natural order (Khalid, 2010).

Third, the concept called *Mizan* or balance holds that we should not exceed the boundary that limits our actions from turning into acts of wasting and over-consuming (Ammar, 2001). This concept is important as will always be a part of the ecosystem and will always have to utilize nature for our needs. However, we should consider the concept of *Mizan* or the balance in utilizing nature. This concept of balance is important not only during our peaceful daily activities but also during wartime on battlefields. This is because Islam also teaches that those who are in the middle of a battle in war are forbidden from harming not only the non-combatants such as women, children, the aged, the infirm, the blind, hermits, peasants, serfs, travelers, and those devoted to monasticism but also from harming the environment (Köylü, 2004). Nature should be treated with kindness and not abused (Ammar, 2001). Therefore, when human beings are utilizing nature, the aim is not to control nature but to use it for devotional purposes such as managing and sharing natural resources (Ammar, 2001). To keep the balance between the need of human beings and the rights of other creatures is to live on this earth as the task of the *Khalifa* (Setia, 2007), which is the fourth concept.

Finally, the fourth concept of *Khalifah* or Responsibility refers to the concept of human beings as *Khalifah* (vice-regents) on earth. In the concept of Khalifah, the role of human beings is not as the proprietor, but as the manager (Ammar, 2001). Setia (2004) uses the terms "stewardship" and "trusteeship" in describing the concept of *Khalifah*. It is not a position or a title given to certain people, but every single human being is already entitled to this position as the *Khalifah*. The role of *Khalifah* is given to human beings because we possess the special ability to speak, understand the concept of creations, having an independent will to distinguish good from evil, and the

ability to prevent evil (Ammar, 2001). As the *Khalifah*, human beings are responsible to protect the universe while at the same time utilizes the bounties of the earth (Ammar, 2001). This role involves trusteeship which imposes moral responsibility where we will be accountable in the hereafter for our actions in this world (Khalid, 2010). Without the proper understanding of all these four concepts of *Tauhid*, *Fitra*, and *Mizan*, human beings will not understand their responsibilities as *Khalifa*.

The outline of Islamic concepts in environmental ethics by Khalid (2010) as described and explained above has a clear structure on how human beings and the environment are essentially interdependent in a deep way as understood by the proponents of the deep ecology movement. These concepts, if included within the curriculum, can serve as important content in teaching deep ecology to university students.

3. The Theocentric Worldview in ESD for University

As mentioned earlier in this paper, it is the agenda of the United Nation to promote environmental awareness through the implementation of ESD at higher education institutions including universities. However, implementation can be complicated with a variety of theoretical and practical understandings of the human-environment relationship. Due to this, Sauvé (2005) proposed 15 worldviews in environmental education. Each worldview has its conception of the environment, aims in environmental education, dominant approaches, and example of strategies. For example, the problem-solving worldview considered the environment as a set of the problem needs to be solved; the educational aim is to learn about environmental issues and develop attitude and skills for solving them; its approach is more cognitive and pragmatic; and some examples of educational strategies are case studies, environmental system analysis, and constructing ecosystem model (Sauvé, 2005). In another example, the holistic worldview regards the environment as the relationship between various dimensions of socio-environmental realities (Gaia) and the complexity of an individual's "being in the world" which is inspired by the philosopher Heidegger and poet-naturalist Goethe; the

educational aim is to develop "organic" understanding of the world in our relationship with the world; its approach is more natural and intuitive; and some examples of educational strategies are meaningful exploration and creative workshop (Sauvé, 2005).

In line with Sauvé's (2005) analysis, we propose another worldview called the theocentric worldview which is centered on a religio-spiritual relationship with God. This worldview regards the environment as something that God (*Tauhid*) created in certain nature (*Fitra*); the educational aim is to know the nature of the environment as well as to realize and acknowledge the responsibility of human beings (*Khalifa*) in maintaining balance (*Mizan*) in the environment; its approach is more religious and spiritual, and some examples of educational strategies are explanation on religious scriptures or teachings that address the environment as the creation of God, and spiritual contemplation on the individual relationship with God that leads to the moral responsibility of human beings in maintaining balance in the environment.

The worldview we are proposing here is different from the existing worldviews in Sauvé's (2005) list in a way that it is centered on students' belief in God as the Creator of everything including human beings and the environment. As proposed by Sauvé (2005), each worldview is not a monolithic category and can be associated with other worldviews. For example, in knowing the nature (*Fitra*) of the environment, this worldview can be associated with the scientific worldview which utilizes scientific method and skills in understanding how nature works; and in executing the responsibilities (*Khalifa*) of maintaining the environmental balance (*Mizan*), this worldview can be associated with the problem-solving worldview. Nevertheless, the central tenet of the scientific method and problem-solving in the theocentric worldview is the religio-spiritual relationship with God as the Creator and human beings as bearers of responsibility in maintaining the balance in nature as created by God.

Felgendreher and Löfgren (2018) demonstrated that certain designs of educational activities can affect the moral perceptions of university

students. Therefore, the theocentric worldview can serve as meaningful content for specific design in educating sustainable development for religious and spiritual students. Unlike studies that explore the relationship between sustainable behavior and current religio-spiritual beliefs of students, we suggest developing a content of ESD based on the theocentric worldview that reflects deeper teaching of religion. There is a possibility that the current understanding of religio-spiritual beliefs is affected by secular understandings as mentioned earlier. This is evident from Muñoz-García and Villena-Martínez's (2020) data which indicated a low level of religiousness and spirituality among the young generation. We suggest a future study that first develops an ESD content that is based on the theocentric worldview we have outlined and use it as an intervention before measuring the correlation between religion-spiritual beliefs and sustainable behavior. Further studies should also explore the possibility of developing a theocentric worldview based on other religions of the world, not only from the Judeo-Christian traditions, but also Eastern religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

D. Conclusion

In this paper, we have outlined four religio-spiritual concepts in Islamic teachings (*Tauhid*, *Fitra*, *Mizan*, *Khalifah*) that shaped the theocentric worldview for ESD. These contents are in line with the deep ecology movement, giving a deeper meaning in understanding the relationship between human beings, God, and the environment. This relationship is centered in God (theocentric) as the Creator of a balanced nature and human beings are responsible for sustaining that balance while utilizing nature. The theocentric worldview in ESD provides not only an opportunity for students to express their religio-spiritual meaning in ESD but more importantly, as an effort in manifesting holistic students as the product of universities. The aim of education should not only to produce graduates with certain skills that are marketable and able to be hired for certain jobs in the industries. What is more important is to produce holistic and mature human beings who also know how to value the

sanctity of a balanced ecosystem, how to love and care for nature, truly understand the purpose and meaning of nature, and protect nature from any excessive exploitation. These are the qualities students who relate themselves with God as the Creator (*Tauhid*) and understand their role responsibility (*Khalifa*) is to maintain the balance (*Mizan*) in nature (*Fitra*) while they are part of nature (*Fitra*) and cannot escape from utilizing it.

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