

Our Endangered World Needs a New Paradigm

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Abstract

Our world is confronted with formidable challenges, even endangering the continuity of human existence. Most of these dangers are manmade, the outcome of a misplaced attitude towards man, matter and nature. This is rooted in a false paradigm based on the autonomy of man, ignoring transcendence. There is an urgent need for a new paradigm along the lines of Albert Einstein's vision that man is a part of the Whole. Urgently needed therefore, is a spiritual awakening, in a highly diversified world with many conflicting interests. A common platform for dialogue and cooperation could be founded on four keywords. This paper offers a perspective on a peaceful, just and sustainable world. It pays particular attention to two key areas: peace and security in the nuclear age, and an economic model that is, at a global scale, just and sustainable. Notwithstanding the great problems confronting us, it is carried by hope.

Our Endangered World Needs a New Paradigm

Our world is under threat of major challenges. Some of these have natural causes; the most ominous are, however, manmade. The instruments created by science and technology risk to annihilate life on this planet: huge power rests in frail human hands!

The distorted view on economics has not only contributed to the wellbeing of many people, but also led to the progressive destruction of our natural habitat. Our culture is out of balance. The equilibrium between matter and spirit is lost. Of crucial importance for the survival of mankind is the development of a new paradigm. Narrow nationalism should give way to global cooperation. The Corona Crisis offers a unique opportunity to reflect upon the current policies towards collective disaster.

This paper will focus on:

- the key challenges to humanity
- a new paradigm – spiritual awakening
- the search for a common platform in a highly diversified world
- two key areas: peace and security in the nuclear age and a new economic model which is just and sustainable
- why do we have hope

1. KEY CHALLENGES TO HUMANITY

- **Prevention of the annihilation of mankind. The current policies are a sure course for disaster. Our world is engaged in a massive preparation for war.**

Military expenditures have reached outrageous proportions (exceeding \$1800 billion, i.e. more than double the top year spending during the cold war), whilst other major areas affecting human security are severely underfunded. Great concern is justified due to the resumption of the arms race. There are now more than 15.000 nuclear weapons. Steps are being taken to increase this number in the coming years. Do we realise that about 100 nuclear weapons are sufficient to put an end to human civilisation? We should increasingly be concerned about the effective management and control of the nuclear weapon systems. These are subject to misinformation, misjudgement, human and technical failure. Even more so given the envisaged delegation of human control of the deployment of nuclear weapons to artificial intelligent systems. This Doomsday Machine, together with new arms technologies, the lowering of the nuclear threshold, developments in cyber warfare and the weaponization of space, is preparing a sure road towards Armageddon.

- **To set course towards a world with a just and sustainable economy**

This is of particular relevance in view of the close link between the actual untenable economic model and the ecological crisis.

- **To stop the progressive destruction of the world's natural habitat.**

Current attempts to address immediate ecological issues are inadequate. Thus far we have failed to live up to global commitments. New ideas about a sustainable economic model are urgently needed, restoring the balance with nature. This includes addressing the issue of consumerism.

- **To reverse growing inequalities.**

Inequalities are a major cause of conflicts, mass migration etc. Initiatives are needed which lead to:

- New development strategies for regions most affected (Africa, Middle East, Latin America)
- Improved transparency of the financial sector (transactions, just fiscal policies)

- **To reduce the causes of massive migration**

Special efforts to address the causes of massive migration, notably inequality and the destruction of natural habitat should be made.

- **To control the immense force resulting from progress in science and technology**

- Preventing developments that are harmful to humans
- Proper handling and use of artificial intelligence.
- Genetic engineering
- Global data processing vs. human dignity and privacy

- Human beings should not be reduced to a bundle of algorithms

- **To manage the corona crisis and future pandemics**

The unparalleled series of asymmetric shocks these challenges impose can only be effectively addressed by concerted, coordinated multilateral action by and on behalf of all nations in the world community and our international agencies for global governance. Unfortunately narrow nationalism stands in the way of a constructive approach. This blindness for the state of affairs can only be overcome by a new paradigm.

Technology and pragmatism alone will not meet the above challenges. For an effective response more is needed, in particular, radical change in our attitude towards man, matter and nature is required. This demands a new vision on man as part of the Whole. In our present culture economics are the dominating force. The equilibrium between matter and spirit is lost. A widely spread spiritual renewal is needed.

2. A NEW PARADIGM – SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

We are living in an insane world, indeed! Looking at the way major challenges to humanity are handled, one cannot avoid the impression that our intellect is engaged in a process of self-destruction, instead of promoting human well-being. Could it be that our deepest motivation is fundamentally flawed? We have lost awareness of the direct relation to the basic ground of human existence. Man is not an autonomous human being, but part of the Whole. The new paradigm demands nothing less than a recapturing of the sense for the transcendent.

The essence of the new paradigm is eloquently expressed by Albert Einstein:

“A human being is a part of the Whole, called by us ‘Universe’, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”

These words are of decisive significance in the actual confrontation with formidable challenges to our human existence. The guiding principle in life is indeed love for humankind and nature. When we grasp the full significance of these words it will help us to overcome the blatant individualism and narrow nationalism, opening our eyes for solidarity and peacefulness.

Spirituality: the Key to a Fundamental Change in Attitude

One of the hopeful developments in the past decades is the resurgence of spirituality in a materialistic world. This remarkable development occurs while the economic juggernaut rolls on with irresistible force, crushing everything obstructing its path. Yet new life is budding in an arid landscape. Spirituality is now – after many years of obscurity – one of the more popular words. Numerous initiatives are receiving a widespread response, both from religious and non-religious people. Apparently, a reaction is setting in against the present technocratic, materialistic culture, which tends to reduce human beings to grabbing zombies. This growing interest in spirituality reflects the rebellion of the soul against an ever more oppressive

modern world. It is a passionate *No* to the reduction of life to crude materialism and sexism, a revulsion against the overwhelming trend to triviality and instant-fulfilment. Fortunately, not all people are numbed by the filth and rubbish daily poured out by a commercially driven entertainment industry. We are indeed living in a time of transition in which new thinking is engaged in a fierce struggle to replace inadequate – even highly dangerous – patterns of thought.

This upsurge of interest in spirituality is not surprising for mainly two reasons. The first one is related to a deep concern about the staggering problems of modern society and the ineffectiveness of old recipes. Indeed, the present political scene does not inspire much confidence. Jockeying for position seems to be a more popular pastime than practising statecraft. Vision and moral courage are rare commodities among politicians who take pride to have freed themselves of any ideological or transcendental ballast. The notion that ‘something is fundamentally wrong’ is, however, spreading fast. The second reason has to do with a growing sense of dissatisfaction about life in general. With the evaporation of the awareness of the basic ground for our human existence disappeared also the sense of orientation. The compass needle lost its bearings. For many, life has become pointless. Boredom and lack of purpose prevail, even among those who have ample means of access to an abundance of consumer goods. In this uninspiring setting, more and more people are awakening from the deep slumber of ‘horizontalism’ (ignoring transcendence). They have a hunch that there must be more in life, something of a higher power, which could open up a new perspective on a fuller, more humane life. Rich sources of inspiration can be found in religions and other sources of wisdom.

Spirituality – an invisible but real force

Spirituality is an invisible but very potent force in real life. It cannot be grasped, as it lacks material substance. Still it gets a hold on people, transforming them by a new outlook on life. It is even capable of changing a society whenever a critical mass of people is reached. It is the crucial factor in meeting our key challenges.

- Spirituality escapes any effort of quantification. It has no price and cannot be bought. Although invaluable, it is freely available to everyone with an open heart. For young and old, for sick and poor, for the healthy and wealthy.
- Spirituality is essential for establishing a creative relationship with the origin of our existence. Opening our hearts to the source of life will help us to discover our true identity.
- Spirituality addresses the whole person, not just one aspect of our personality. It provides an integrating magnetic force, capable of healing inner fragmentation, thus enabling us to live a meaningful life, free from the enslavement of materialism and hedonism.
- Spirituality provides also the sustaining force to those who are suffering or have to cope with endless frustrations in life and work. In opening up the access to an endless source of inspiration, we receive the courage to continue to act even when the case looks hopeless.

- Spirituality is not just another quality of the human person like intelligence, character or personal charm. It is the central force in life, determining our deepest motivation, a matter of the heart, centre of all decisions. From here the answer is given to the fundamental question: *where do you stand with your possibilities, at this crucial moment in history?* In essence, this is the basic question for every human being: *where are you?* Do we take *our* place in responsibility for the creation entrusted to us?

The essence of spirituality cannot be captured in words; it always looks for embodiment in acts. The emphasis is not so much on *talking* about the essence, but on trying *to live it*. The only language therefore that can be used is that of love. This is what mystics of all times have tried to convey. A beautiful expression of this experience is to be found in the Song of Songs, where human and divine love is united.

Whether humanity will follow the long line of extinct species depends first and foremost on our flexibility to change old models of thinking. Human decisions, not blind fate, steered us into the present quagmire. The key to our future rests in our hands. Whether this key will be used, depends on the rediscovery of the paramount importance of the spiritual force in life. This is certainly a tall order under present circumstances dominated by crude materialism. But it can be met, if much more attention is given to spiritual renewal than is presently the case.

3. A COMMON PLATFORM IN A HIGHLY DIVERSIFIED WORLD

Who would dispute that a spiritual renewal of our culture is long overdue? The contribution of science and technology to a substantial improvement and betterment of our quality of life is indisputable. The age of Enlightenment paved the road for ‘responsible man’, freed from abuse of power by church and monarchs. But has this ‘autonomous man’ not overestimated himself by closing his eyes to the greater Reality from which we are inseparable?

Would it not be possible, in a world with so many conflicting interests between states and such a colourful diversity of philosophies of life, to rally support for a shared creative vision that leads to a reorientation of our culture?

Can we find common ground to set course for a sustainable, more liveable society? I believe that we can, as the sources for this shared vision are indeed present in science, religion and other convictions in life. Let me make an attempt to identify the fundament for a common approach.

How can we find a common platform in a highly diversified world? The starting point is an experience of reality that we can all identify with, regardless of differences in belief. We all live in a world under threat, humanists, agnostics and believers alike. We must chart a new course together. The ingredients for that joint reflection are present in four key words that everyone can relate to.

Keywords

- Interconnectedness
- Vulnerability
- Urge to live
- Awe

The first two, *Interconnectedness* and *Vulnerability* are based on hard facts. *The urge to live* is vital for a human being. The fourth word, *Awe*, reflects a fundamental experience that is repressed in our culture, but potentially present in every human being.

It goes without saying that these keywords may be differently rooted in a humanist or agnostic than in a monotheist. The values these keywords inspire, however, are shared by all. Some of these are: responsibility, respect for life, peace, justice, solidarity, and moderation.

Interconnectedness.

Science in particular has deepened our understanding of the fundamental *interconnectedness* of all ecosystems. Many religions too have propagated this for centuries. This insight is crucial, both for the individual and for society as a whole. It can contribute to the replacement of the sterile egocentric *culture of individualism* by a *culture of connectedness*, based on relating and caring. The global *Campaign of Compassion* works towards this end. This inspires values like justice, solidarity and the pursuit of peace. In political terms, it means caring for the poor and weak in society, social and just taxation, a humane immigration policy, etc. This notion of interconnectedness is also of particular relevance in our globalizing world. Growing awareness of connectedness can promote the development of international agreements (e.g. for raw materials, water) that take into account the legitimate interests of all countries, including the weaker partners. The increased interdependence among nations demands a progressive international dialogue and cooperation.

Vulnerability

Is it still necessary to elaborate on the vulnerability of our ecosystem after the impressive documentary *Planet Earth*? Do the facts outlined in the reports of United Nations' experts and the Climate Change Conferences in Paris not speak loudly enough? We are headed for an environmental catastrophe within the next decades. The current environmental crisis is largely caused by the unsustainable pattern of production and consumption of about one fifth of the world population. Three fifths of the world is now following this globally untenable model of development at an accelerated pace. How could we close our eyes to the severity of the situation, given that the problem is further compounded by explosive population growth?

In order to repel ultimate global catastrophe, cooperation between science, religion and other views of life is required. Only then can the colossal forces that have been developed in recent decades be controlled. Science can contribute predominantly in the field of technology. Our view of life can inspire the necessary behavioural change. This partnership is also essential for a sustainable economy on a global scale, an economy that respects the boundaries dictated by nature.

Urge to live

The urge to live is inherent to all forms of life. For human beings this implies another aspect, namely the longing to live well, in a world where living is good. A world, in which peace and justice are not just empty words. A world, which provides future generations with the opportunity to enjoy the beauty and diversity of Mother Nature.

The current deterioration of the necessary conditions for life thwarts the realization of this deepest desire. This has stirred the primordial instinct - the will to live. This force manifests itself in the surge of creative initiatives to promote sustainability in business and other sectors, and also in numerous groups, movements and NGO's. We're in this battle for the long haul, and the courage to persist despite adversity is crucial. That is why access to a fountain of hope is indispensable. Hope springs eternal!

The necessity of a more responsible way of relating to man, matter and nature is greater than ever, hence the urgency of a thorough reconsideration of the premises of our culture of greed. This is where religions, other philosophies, and science - each in their own way - share a joint responsibility. That applies equally to all who bear responsibility in politics, economy, business, the media, and culture. They are the ones who shape the process of change.

Many religions preach a resounding call to change our way of life, to leave this misguided path. Science provides indispensable analyses and suggestions for creative new directions. Politicians and managers are faced with the challenge of paving those ways!

Awe.

A single word, that so aptly captures the sense of rapture we experience when faced with the wonder of that which transcends us, the miracle of life in the boundless Universe. It is a word that evokes a fundamental attitude of profound respect and reverence for the source of all being. For the religious man, it is rooted in his relation to God. The Holy Books bear witness to this living relationship. The Psalms beautifully sing its praise. But the non-believer too can identify with this fundamental principle. In the international Pugwash Movement, I have met many leading scientists who – being agnostic – were fulfilled with awe in their contemplation of the structure and interconnectedness of the micro- and macro cosmos. The advancing scientific understanding of the precision of the laws that enable life on earth adds to the sense of awe for the origin of all being. Indeed, progress in scientific discovery can lead to a greater sense of awe.

This fundamental principle also emerged during the installation of the major European telescope on the Spanish island of La Palma, in the presence of several European heads of state. A famous astronomer pointed out, that this telescope allows us to penetrate even further into the secrets of the Universe, “but that everything we do here is nothing more than reflecting on the great miracle that it exists”. The sense of *Awe* is fuelled by wonder and contemplation of all being; by the primal force of nature, as well as her beauty and elegance.

In our Western culture, the vision and feeling for what transcends us is often lacking. In ‘flatland’, the horizon remains limited; there is no depth dimension. This is where banality and greed thrive, while humanity and integrity languish. For many, this sense of Awe is an unknown experience. The Self, elevated on a pedestal, is mainly governed by the horizontal dimensions of counting and measuring. A hurried and hectic existence leaves little time for reflection on fundamental questions of life. Moreover – thanks to science – many commodities have become a given. When we come to understand a trifle of the process of life, we tend to believe that we therefore have a handle on it. That the principle of life in itself is a great miracle too often escapes attention. And precisely that insight might help us gain perspective on man’s place in the *Ultimate Reality*.

A Vision of Interdependence

Nobody can ignore these four key words, because they determine the *human condition*. Each of them in turn has the power to inspire change, but a cultural reorientation at this critical stage requires a clear vision of their interdependence. Only then, the indispensable synergy will be engaged. This vision of intimate interdependence is currently lacking. This is a serious shortcoming, because the very fusion of all four key words can shift the balance in favour of the change that is now underway. To clarify the above, I mention the mind-set of some

leading environmental scientists who expect total salvation based on a pragmatic approach. But precisely this blind spot for the deeper spiritual underpinnings of the environmental crisis (the fourth key word) hinders the progress of sustainability.

On the other hand, there is a form of religiosity, which leads to resignation and passivity, rather than the required engagement. Single-minded fixation on the fourth key word – and the consequent attitude of *awe* – can sometimes lead to a failure to take a stance based on the factual *Interconnectedness* and *Vulnerability*.

Each of these four words is an important signpost. But the decisive impetus for cultural change comes from a clear view of the cohesion between these key words. Together they provide a basis for a joint reflection on the continued existence of humanity in a humane, sustainable society.

A Common Platform

The much needed reorientation of our culture would benefit greatly from cooperation beyond perceived differences. The vision of the cohesion between the key words provides a starting point for people of different views of life to come together and set a new, common course.

Would that be possible for science and religion, too?

Certainly, the relationship between them has historically been tense. Especially when each exceeded the boundaries of their own competence by taking a stance on matters which belong in the domain of the other. Essentially there is no need for contradiction, because each has its own domain, with its own methodology and a different objective. Science focuses on analysis, the explanation of phenomena and the study of regularities.

Religion and philosophy focus on giving meaning, and identifying a code of life that make a society liveable. They focus on insights that provide structure and cohesion to life, and promote personal development that combines freedom and responsibility.

In the important book - *The Great Partnership* - renowned British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks provides a powerful argument for cooperation between science and religion. Both are aimed at promoting human well-being. And precisely that is what is now threatened by the irresponsible way of relating to man, matter, and nature. The disturbing perversion of the essence of religion by fanaticism, extremism, and violence does not need to deter us from collaborating with the vast majority of moderates. A radical minority might distort our perception of the essence of a religion, but can never strip off its original meaning. The famous Swiss theologian Hans Küng rightly distinguishes between true and false religiosity. His criterion is whether the well-being of man is served. In this context, the importance of dialogue within religious denominations is further emphasized. Like the cooperation between religions and other views of life, it deserves more attention from spiritual and political leaders.

The fundamental *Interconnectedness* and *Vulnerability* demand that we take effective action in the short term. It is imperative as it flows from the urge to live, hence the urgency of joint reflection of believers and nonbelievers, science and religion, the cultural sector, economy, and politics. Our collective survival under humane living conditions is at stake.

Religion without science is blind, but science without religion is lame (Einstein)

Love - The Keystone

The preceding discussion avoided the use of the word 'Love'. This is due to the widespread misconception that a 'soft power' is irrelevant in a formal discussion of cultural change. Mistakenly so, because Love is one of the most powerful forces known to man. It can bring the mighty to their knees, and move people to act in favour of a fellow human in need, even at the expense of personal sacrifice.

It is also Love that gives a powerful impetus to our awareness of the four key words. Certainly, reason forces us all to do so, but without love we end up in a cold, harsh society.

Love is universal, we are steeped in it in the womb and it is transmitted to future generations. Love is the keystone in the dome created by the four key words. It is the unifying force, and has left its mark on each of them.

*It is the highest form of connectedness
the most sensitive and fragile
fulfils our deepest yearning
and deepens the sense of awe.*

Love is central to many religions. The inner knowing that nothing - neither might nor powers, in life or death - can separate us from that love, is a constant source of inspiration, strength, independence and courage to persevere.

In our formalized society, a rediscovery of the rejuvenating power of love is essential. Not merely for the individual, but for all of us. It is about more than sustainability: ultimately, it is love that makes society liveable.

Discussing a Viable Route Together

For meeting the key challenges to humanity, and for a new inspiration of our culture: a realistic assessment of the critical situation, in which we find ourselves, is required. I will focus against the backdrop of the relationship between the four key words on two major questions: peace and security in the nuclear age and a just and sustainable economic model.

Finally: whether we will succeed to achieve the required fundamental cultural reorientation in time depends on whether a tipping point can be reached, where enough people are willing to promote it. Hence the importance of a well-founded view of life, which determines the way of relating to man, matter and nature. The decisive factor may be the answer to the ultimate question posed to each of us: What have I done in my lifetime, with my abilities, in this critical phase for humanity? Was this a 'self-centred' existence, focused on money and blind to the distress of the world? Or did I try - in a spirit of empathy - to promote a more peaceful, humane, and sustainable society?

To this question, Herman van Rompuy, the former president of the European Council, offers a profound and guiding answer in a Haiku of a few words:

*God, goodness and love
both received and given
give meaning to life*

4. A NEW APPROACH IN TWO KEY AREAS

We are living in a deeply divided world full of conflicts and diversity of opinions in life. Yet we share one paramount interest: to overcome the major challenges to humanity, ensuring the continuity of life on this planet. The road to a liveable world is full of obstacles. We need a series of steps. Two key areas are of particular importance:

- To secure peace and security, preventing our total annihilation as a result of a major military conflict,
- To stop the progressive degeneration of our natural habitat.

A. Peace and security in a nuclear age

If there is one area in urgent need of new thinking and acting, it is in the field of Peace and Security. We are living in an absurd world, wasting huge, scarce resources on weaponry that can never be used without risking the lives of the greater part of humanity. At the same time, there is no real willingness to deal adequately with the major challenges we are faced with. Immense suffering could be prevented if only a small fraction of the enormous military expenditures would be made available for these other concerns. The bitter irony is, that the spectacular increase in military power did not bring us greater security, but a much greater human insecurity.

We are actually living in the presence of a military arsenal with a destructive potential that could end the human venture at short notice. We are sleeping on a volcano, oblivious to its rumblings. The magnitude of this is widely underestimated.

The current ominous reality and developments are founded on an outdated security concept. In the 21st century governments still act on the basis of the old Roman adagio: *if you want peace, prepare for war*. This is sheer folly! Largely fuelled by the military-industrial-scientific complex. In the nuclear age we are forced to adapt our security concept to the new reality created by science and technology. We need therefore a fundamental reappraisal in our thinking about peace and security. The new paradigm should lead us to a new security concept: *if you want peace, prepare actively for peace*.

This implies among others addressing major causes of conflict. Diplomacy and development of poor countries are more effective instruments for promoting peace and security than military force.

From MAD to MAS

In our present security policies the concept of mutual assured destruction plays a predominant role. This concept however has become obsolete, not simply because the original two competing superpowers have been replaced by a total of nine nuclear states, but also because of the destabilizing effect of the dynamic pursuit of Research and Development, including the development of new weapon systems.

Human and technological failure of the present huge pre-programmed destructive capacity cannot be excluded. Among experts there is a growing concern in this respect. The

immeasurable potential consequences of such failure are an additional argument against the credibility of nuclear deterrence as a security concept.

At present mutual fear and distrust largely drive military expenditures worldwide. We have to realize however, that true security cannot be obtained at the expense of the other. This means: “I am secure, if you do not feel threatened by me”.

International peace and security first and foremost requires that the major powers actively work together to overcome this so-called Security Dilemma. It refers to the fact that measures taken by one state to increase its own security prompt other states to reciprocate in kind, fuelling a vicious cycle of armaments that results in the overall deterioration of the security of all. But War is not destiny. There is in fact a way out of this Security Dilemma. It does necessitate a concerted effort on behalf of political leaders, especially of the major powers, to reduce international tensions. International peace and security, after all, does not come about in a vacuum. This can only be brought about by awareness on the part of these political leaders of the severe risks posed by a global armed conflagration to their own societies – before a 21st century version of the Cuban Missile Crisis spirals out of control. It fundamentally depends on their acknowledgement that cooperation instead of confrontation is the only way out of this dilemma. Awareness and acknowledgement should be followed by a series of confidence building measures which can then provide the foundation for a new architecture of arms control - and arms reduction regimes.

This leads to a radical departure from the prevailing concept of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). We need to move towards a concept of Mutual Assured Security (MAS), a Copernican turn in our thinking about security.

The new paradigm brings us to the following recommendations:

- To convene an UN High level panel of leading personalities and experts on the key challenges to peace and security in the nuclear age. Guidance can be given by similar initiatives in the past, a.o. UN high-level panel on key challenges (2004), Report Brundtland Commission and the Palme Report on common security.
- Stop the resumption of the arms race, including the weaponization of space and preparations for cyber warfare.
- Opening negotiations on the reduction of weapons systems.
- Dismantling the Doomsday Machine step by step under effective control mechanisms. To begin with the strategic weapons on hair trigger alert, the concept of first use and pre-emptive strike.
- Set in motion a process of drastic reduction of the budget on military expenditures.
- Re-allocate vast resources on Research and Development of new weapons systems to activities serving human development.
- At present the outlook for international cooperation in the field of peace and security looks grim. Of crucial importance therefore is to increase pressure on those holding responsible political positions. This demands a worldwide action aimed at increased public awareness about the imminent threat to human existence.

B. A global economic order, which is just and sustainable

Our world is in the firm grip of economics. The dominance of economics is one of the striking features in modern society. Practically no sector is immune for its onslaught. Basic humanitarian values, like respect for life, justice, solidarity, moderation and decency are under great pressure in a society in the grip of money, profits, competition and extreme efficiency. This imbalance between the spiritual and material aspects seriously impairs the quality of life, making it more and more difficult to achieve real fulfilment. The present economic model is neither just nor sustainable at a global level. The social situation in most modern states gives rise to serious concern because of the widening gap between rich and poor, not only within nations, but also between countries. As the famous Oxford scholar professor Kate Raworth has put it in her news-breaking economic paper “Doughnut Economics”: “Humanities’ pressure on Earth’s life-giving system is in dangerous overshoot... The global economy stands face to face with the carrying capacity of the Earth.”

The driving forces behind the economic mechanism

The orchestrated movement behind the dance around the golden calf looks solid; its tempo won’t be easily changed because it is guided by three closely interrelated myths:

- Unlimited material needs of human beings, leading to worldwide consumerism with its large scale harmful consequences. Big efforts are made to ensure an ever rising consumer demand. People are constantly indoctrinated through TV and other media with vain promises of a better life, whenever a particular product is bought.
- Necessity of permanent growth. The growth ideology is linked to the so called ‘endless needs’.
- Idolatry of a free market without any restrictions.

These stubborn myths are the poisoning fruits of a misconception about economics, it ignores:

- Man is not a voracious animal with insatiable needs. As a responsible human being he is in a position to moderate his longing for ever-more goods and services.
- Endless growth is impossible given the limited carrying capacity of the Earth.

Permanent material growth is considered indispensable for employment and prosperity. They also assume that only growth could provide the financial means for environmental and social policies.

Indeed, economic growth for the Low-Income and Middle-Income countries is an essential condition for the improvement of the living conditions of millions of people. But the same cannot be said for the rich countries. Here a different type of non-material growth should be envisaged. It is about time that the prosperous countries should free themselves from the obsession that one has to go all-out for getting more and more in order to achieve fulfilment. Real fulfilment in life does not depend on material factors but on our inner disposition, our own spirituality!

- The idolatry of an absolute free market without any regulations. This has put us back into the law of the jungle: the winner takes all, symbolized by multinationals! There is no such thing as a ‘mechanical equilibrium’; economics is dynamics and require stewardship.

The new paradigm should free us from the dominance of economics. Quality in life is more important than quantity.

Between the three myths analysed above, there exists a common link: *hubris*. This denial of transcendence, this so-called ‘liberation of man’ has led to a narrowing down of human possibilities, instead of a better development of his faculties. The ‘death of God’ left an empty space that was soon occupied by newly self-created gods such as: unlimited material needs, permanent growth and idolatry of the market.

The strong belief, founded in the conditions of the nineteenth century, that economic growth is a necessity to end human deprivation, has become self-destructive, particularly in the High-income countries.

Clearing the way toward a just and sustainable economic order demands a new look at economics. This new perspective can be opened, when we see economics as an *instrument to serve the common good*, instead of a goal in itself. This will be, however, hard to achieve without a spiritual renewal. Decisive, therefore, will be the rediscovery of our responsibility towards the source of our existence and fellow man, and a full consciousness of the planetary boundaries. From here will sprout a new relation to man, material goods and nature, thus to economics!

Economics – a goal in itself or an instrument to serve mankind?

The new paradigm should provide valuable guidance for a new approach to economics. It should be clear that the economy is only part of a larger reality and not an autonomous entity ruled by absolute laws. It requires wise stewardship. There can be no doubt about the impressive contribution of economics to the phenomenal improvement in living conditions, during past centuries. However, man has been overshooting the mark: our economic models and our consumption pattern stand face to face with the carrying capacity of Earth. Economics are degraded to a set of rules and concepts on ‘gains’, ‘rate of return’ and on maximizing profits, instead of being a means serving the wellbeing of humanity.

The question about the purpose of economics is therefore of great relevance. There is a real need to develop a clear view on the *essence* of economics. This could be defined as follows:

The purpose of economics is the responsible use of the limited means at man’s disposal in order to promote the common and individual well being of present and future generations. Production, distribution and consumption of goods must be oriented towards a just and sustainable society in which the planetary boundaries are strictly respected.

Indeed, the essence of economics is to *serve man and society* in such a way that all people can lead a decent existence, *within the limits imposed by the natural environment*.

The above given definition holds consequences, which will not be easily accepted in a post-enlightenment society, in the grip of materialism and hedonism; and certainly not, in a spiritual climate in which basic values like solidarity, compassion and respect for life are undermined. Economic theory and practice are nowadays built on a very narrow basis, leaving little room for the basic teachings of religion. It is precisely this loss of vision on man’s place in Ultimate Reality that is at the root of the unjust and unsustainable economic

model: Man's (political and social) addiction to and lock in in wealth accumulation and never-ending consumption.

The forces resisting any change in the present situation are formidable. This makes it difficult to realize the urgently needed transformation in production, distribution and consumption patterns. Commercial interests, as well as a large number of citizens, will resist any attempt to initiate a more sober life style. Material sacrifices are not popular in a secularized society, which gives priority to eager acquisition and immediate satisfaction of desires. These reservations, however, should not withhold us from advocating some fundamental changes in human behaviour and in the present economic order.

- Rebalancing the role of the market, the State and Society, with the emphasis on the State and Society, aimed at investing in the sources of wealth: natural, human, social, cultural, and clean energy, with the help of transformational public investments;
- Design circular, regenerative and distributive economies by redistributing wealth, i.e. land, enterprise, technology, knowledge etc., with participation of all humans;
- Get away from the dominant economic concepts 'gain', 'rate of return' and 'efficiency of the market': use money as a means of exchange for regenerative investments fully respecting the planetary boundaries, instead of consumption, hereby replacing 'gain' by 'maintaining value'.
- Human behaviour: get away from the self-interested and dominant-over-nature man to the social, interdependent and dependent-upon-the-living-world man.

A new paradigm should lead to:

- Re-framing our inner motivation, giving more emphasis to serving the common good and sharing, instead of amassing private wealth.
- A more sober and responsible lifestyle, putting an end to consumerism. Quality in life is more important than quantity in goods. This will reduce the ecological footprint of the prosperous states.
- A more sustainable world order, safeguarding the natural habitat.
- Full transparency and strong regulations of financial and capital markets.
- A decrease of the gap between rich and poor; eliminating exclusion and poverty. Global regulation (moderation) of top salaries and relates payments, equitable tax systems, eliminating and preventing tax evasion and tax havens.
- Globalisation fully respecting the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals and the whole of the planetary boundaries.
- A fully democratic and transparent management of international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which should abandon their 'in defense of growth paradigm'.

Together we can overcome the present obstacles and take the necessary steps for a new world order. The current Corona crisis offers a unique opportunity for the emergence of a new, sustainability-oriented economy. This requires innovative policy, not a return to the past.

5. WHY DO WE HAVE HOPE

The present situation looks grim, but we should never lose hope. The Corona crisis is mobilising creative energy and a great upsurge of true human solidarity. Signs of hope are:

- Growing awareness that we are living in a spent culture in urgent need of new inspiration.
- Numerous initiatives pointing towards spiritual renewal and responsible management aiming at the common good.
- The impressive commitment of many aimed to a peaceful, just and sustainable world.
- The irresistible urge to live life in its fullness and to pass this on to future generations. The love of life!

About the Author

Edy Korthals Altes (1924) is a former Dutch diplomat, with a degree in economics, who served as Deputy Permanent Representative at the EEC in Brussels, and as Ambassador in Warsaw, and finally in Madrid. He resigned in 1986, in connection with his public stance on the arms race. Since then, he has been an outspoken proponent of global peace and security, inter-religious cooperation, and spiritual renewal as Vice Chairman of the Dutch chapter of the Pugwash Movement (1987-'95), Chairman of the Section International Affairs of the Netherlands Council of Churches (1990-'96), Co-president EECOD (European Ecumenical Commission on Development, 1991-'93), Member EKD Advisory Commission for Development Affairs (1992-'97, Germany) and President of the World Conference of Religions for Peace (1994-'99, Honorary president 1999-2004). He is currently a Fellow of the World Academy of Art and Science.

This paper contains elements from previous publications by the author.

Relevant Publications by the Author, a.o.:

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