

# **WELL-BEING AND PROSPERITY: Multidirectional Disciplinary Interactions with Religion**

**Manoj Morais, Joshy Joseph Karakunnel, Sebastian Perumbilly, Guydeuk Yeon, and Gerard Rassendren\***

**Abstract:** Despite significant advancements in science and technology, religion continues to influence human lives. The twentieth-century perspectives from social sciences, influenced by the secular hypothesis, mainly highlight the negative influence of religion on human progress and practically ignore its influential and positive impact on various fields of knowledge/disciplines. In this paper, we have examined literature from politics, economics, and psychology to understand religion's impact on these disciplines and vice versa. We find that religion's contribution to human society in the 20th and 21st centuries has been mostly positive, especially in education, healthcare, social justice, economic growth, ethics, and initiatives for eradicating inequality and injustice. For instance, religion provides effective coping measures and strategies when humans face uncertainties and catastrophes

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\***Manoj Morais** is a Ph.D. scholar and adjunct faculty in the Department of Economics, CHRIST University, Bangalore, India.

Email: manoj.morais@christuniversity.in

**Dr Joshy K. J.** is an Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Economics, CHRIST University, Bangalore, India.

Email: joshy.kj@christuniversity.in

**Dr Sebastian Perumbilly** is a Fulbright Fellow in Academic and Professional Excellence, and an associate professor in the Department of Marriage and Family Therapy at Southern Connecticut State University, USA. Email: perumbillys1@southernct.edu

**Dr Guydeuk Yeon** is a Professor of Economics at Christ University, Bangalore, India. Email: director.ic@christuniversity.in

**Dr Gerard Rassendren** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Economics, CHRIST University, Bangalore, India.

Email: gerard.rassendren@christuniversity.in

and facilitate comfort, confidence, and emotional wellness. Further, we realised that (i) the contemporary research literature in social sciences generally highlights the interaction between religion and various fields of knowledge in a unidirectional way — religion influencing disciplines and not how disciplines influence religion, and (ii) that it fails to reveal a more complex multidirectional and circular relationship between religion and social sciences. This paper proposes ways to bring together social scientists and religious scholars to facilitate the much-needed discussion on the multidirectional relationship between religion and social sciences, thereby paving the way toward the well-being of individuals and social transformation.

**Keywords:** charitable giving, circularity, linearity, political participation, religion, sustainable development, and well-being

## 1. Introduction

Religion, a unified system of beliefs and practices associated with a sacred being, has been a crucial part of society, influencing human interactions and shaping people's values and viewpoints. The evidence provided by the archaeologists through ritual objects, ceremonial burial sites, and other religious artefacts reveals that religion has been an integral part of all human societies and cultures in one form or another since time immemorial.

Historically, the evolution of religion can be viewed in three stages. In its first stage, religion was mostly ecstatic and ritualistic and facilitated social bonds. In its second stage, religion's role expanded and included healing purposes (e.g., the emergence of shamanistic healing rituals). In the third stage, more roles were added to religion's functions in society, including arts, elaborate burial rituals, music, and artefacts. Several sociological perspectives have discussed the role of religion in society. According to the Functionalist perspective, religion positively affects social cohesion and serves adherents by providing reasons for emotional control and insights into

spiritual mysteries. Max Weber's Secularisation Hypothesis discusses religion's diminishing role as society progresses. Few other perspectives have opined that religious extremism causes violence, often associated with terrorism like violent Jihad (Venkataraman 229-248).

Society classifies the world as sacred and profane. The sacred consists of awe-inspiring and knowable only through extraordinary experiences, whereas the secular is about empirically observable things known through daily experiences. Religion (with its norms, values, power, and beliefs) is a conservative force that brings people together through various communal religious practices and ceremonies. Thus, it facilitates better social interactions. Further, religion helps humans overcome challenges associated with birth, marriage, psychological stress, fear of death, and other risks, as well as uncertainties of life. By this, religion maintains societal order by promoting value consensus and mechanisms to comprehend unpredictable events.

This paper examines how religion *interacts* with social science to create a deeper understanding that leads to human well-being, societal transformation, and overall sustainable prosperity. We are also observing if there is any *multidirectional interaction* happening between social science and religion.

## **2. Relationship between Religion and Politics**

Religion influences politics from various angles, such as the orientation of the state, public policy, political participation, and international relations. Despite secularisation trends, religion remains prominent in politics. It also depends on the kind of relationship religion has with the state. For instance, according to the *Pew Research Centre Report*, on the topic of "Key Facts about Government Favoured Religion in the World," 27 countries have Islam as the official religion, and 13 countries have Christianity as the official religion; there are 40 countries with Christianity as the preferred religion; 106 countries have no preferred or official religion, and 10 countries hold hostile relation to religion.

States with an official religion confer special legal status and tangible benefits to their favoured religion. The policymakers and governments in these states are guided by religious laws, which get integrated into their political systems. For example, in most Muslim countries, the government derives legitimacy from Islam and legislation antithetical to Islam is strictly prohibited.

The countries with both official and preferred religions provide favoured treatment for certain religious groups (e.g., granting public subsidies to private schools, allowing religious instructions in public schools, recognising religious holidays as state holidays, granting tax breaks to religious organisations, etc.). In certain Christian countries where Roman Catholicism is the official state religion, special privileges are extended to the Church, including funding for construction and administration of institutions. However, States with no official and preferred religion guarantee religious freedom, treat all religious groups equally and extend benefits evenly.

Religion also influences public policies in States with official religion and preferred religion. For instance, policies on abortion do have mixed approaches in certain Islamic and Christian countries. If any pregnant woman is aborting against the provisions of Sharia Law in Islam, all parties, including those who induce abortion, are subject to imprisonment. Nevertheless, most Islamic countries permit abortion if needed to save the mother's life (Asman 73-89). However, Christian countries with Roman Catholicism as the official religion do not permit abortion at all (Theodorou and Sandstorm). Similarly, financial instruments in compliance with Sharia laws, such as Islamic bonds or Sukuk, are not supposed to earn or pay interest rates because Islam is against usury.

Religion is gaining much relevance in international politics as it helps explain various global issues. For instance, Errol Henderson asserts that religious differences are the reason behind international wars (649-668). Similarly, Sant'Egidio, a Rome-based community, successfully mediated to bring peace during the Mozambique civil war in 1992 (Smock 221-263).

Based on all these observations, we argue that there is a positive impact of religion in the political sphere where social welfare, freedom of thought, a democratic way of life, etc., are promoted. However, religion's impact on political spheres varies depending on the relationship between religion and the state. In short, religion's influence has been increasing in policymaking and the socio-political scenario both in the national and international arena.

### **3. Relationship between Religion and Economy**

The relationship between religion and economics is historically mediated by human traits such as compassion, hospitality, benevolence, thrift, and charitable giving. For instance, in Islam and other oriental religions, charitable giving and helping each other is an obligation. Also, studies have reported that religious service participation positively impacts volunteering and charitable giving (Clerkin *et al.* 675-698). Similarly, those individuals who regularly practice their religion are more likely to be active in volunteering and making donations than those who do not have any religion (Brooks 1-2). The ideals and virtues upheld by the religions help achieve goals related to income equality and fair distribution of productive resources.

The association of religion with economic growth and development has been well established. In a non-communist economy, the increase in the national productive capacity results from individuals' work efforts and economic opportunities for material advancement. In contrast, a communist economy is more of a command economy system, and they do not believe in the right of the ordinary person to pursue legitimate business interests. The total of such individual actions produces national economic growth (Palanca 163).

Religious institutions, including temples and monasteries, are associated with economic development programs (Rao 1-5). Religion has evolved to be an institution that focuses on reformative movements, including social well-being, eradicating inequities, and enhancing the economic conditions

of people. For instance, religion helps individuals develop traits such as thrift, honesty, hard work, work ethic, charity, hospitality, etc., which affect the economy. These traits lead to economic development. Weber believed that Protestant ethics, emphasising thrift and work ethic, contributed to a productive economy and the rise of capitalism (McCleary and Barro 49-72). Davidson and Caddell argue that religion influences how people think about work and treat it as a divine calling (135-147). Qayyum et al. argue that religion reduces poverty through faith-based poverty alleviation programs, which might positively impact economic growth (793-834). In short, religion and spirituality have contributed to the well-being of individuals and communities and thus improve standard of living in human society.

#### **4. Relationship between Religion and Psychology**

Religion and spirituality significantly influence and improve human lives from mental health perspectives. As Harry Aponte, a leading family therapist in the United States noted, religion and spirituality continue to “lend meaning to our existence, set moral standards for living, and assume some sense of moral connection among people at the very heart of humanity” (16). In that sense, religion brings people together and inspires them to care for each other.

At the individual level, religion helps people improve their well-being. For instance, contemporary clinical literature and meta-analysis of randomised clinical trials have reported how religion and spirituality improve self-esteem, induce hope, increase the human capacity for forgiveness, strengthen abstinence practices from using psychoactive substances, expedite psychological and physical recovery and, promote tolerance to diseases, contribute to better adaptation to difficult circumstances in life, and abates depression, anxiety, blood pressure, stress, improve individuals’ social connections and meaning-making processes (Moberg 95-134; Oxhandler et al. 258). Since religion and spiritual practices continue to improve

people's lives, they have become crucial topics in contemporary psychotherapy and clinical research.

Also, in times of adversity and crises, humans naturally view problems and their solutions through a spiritual and religious lens. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, religion helped people deepen their faith in God and thus cope with uncertainties through prayer, meditation, and yoga (PEW Research Report, "Strengthened Faith during COVID-19").

In brief, studies attest that religiosity and spirituality play a significant positive role in improving human well-being and sustainable growth and prosperity in human relationships; hence, contemporary clinical research has begun to document the positive impact of religion on people's lives.

## **5. Contributions of Religion to Ethics**

Though there are undoubtedly diverse viewpoints about the interface of religion and ethics, it can be said with certainty that religion does play a significant role in the development of ethics. However, ethics can exist by itself; and possess rational and non-religious lines of reasoning.

Of the many aspects of material life, progress is one of the critical aspects of the economy impacted by religion and ethics. A religious faith system can create consciousness in individuals and the community to visualise life and to get a sense of progress. In this connection, one of the faith systems that we examined is the Judaic tradition. History records that the activities of the Jews and the instruments of commerce that they developed and used were advanced relative to the period. The reason is that Judaism did not consider material progress as religiously and ethically problematic. Prosperity was treated as a sign of divine providence. This was further supplemented in the structure of the stories and events in the Bible.

With its emphasis on the Decalogue, Judaism has contributed to the development of ethics. For instance, the Hebrew Bible value system presents a positive view of material possessions if they were acquired with a clear sense of morality and condemns the acquisition of wealth and covetousness as

morally wrong (Exodus 20:2-17; Deuteronomy 5: 6-18). Similarly, Judaic view taught that no humans, including Kings, should be considered like a Godhead because all humans are considered fallible, could make mistakes and be questioned. The prophets constantly reminded "Israelite kings that they were not omnipotent; they were not equal to God, but his subordinates" (Sedlacek 55) and "Rulers make mistakes, and it is possible to subject them to tough criticism" (Sedlacek 56).

What does this mean to authority and policymaking and, as a consequence, to material prosperity and overall well-being? The use of authority and policy imperatives can be mistaken, especially by being discriminatory and so non-inclusive. Such processes can pull people down to a state of unfreedom and feeling of exclusion. These do not augur well to progressively attain any reasonable level of material prosperity as well as overall well-being since, "A land will be fruitful, and its people bear fruit and give birth to the future, only to the extent that it can foster a sense of belonging among its members, create bonds of integration between generations and different communities, and avoid all that makes us insensitive to others and leads to further alienation" (Pope Francis, online)

Further, human economic progress in the material sense was significant, but at the same time, sustainability for future generations was also taken seriously. The earth and everything in it have life, not dull and senseless, in that, "spiritual teachings have celebrated and consecrated our ties to the nonhuman world, reminding us of our delicate and inescapable partnership with air, land, water and fellow human beings" (Gottlieb 7). A choice of the Divine has given them existence, and the Divine was appreciative of the same, as evident in the words, "God saw all He had made, and indeed it was very good" (Genesis 1: 31).

This view can be suspected that God made human beings as the 'master of the earth' and put nature under their control resulting in an interpretation that humans have the right to extract from this earth (Genesis 1: 26-31). However, nature being in the service of human beings does not mean

unsustainable forms of progress are allowed. In fact, in God's perception, the extent of one's action is not unfettered but has limits with a moral clarity that involves even the non-human, by positing the view that "nature becomes the Body of God, or the 'neighbour' whom we must treat as we would like to be treated" (Gottlieb 9). Mastery over anything or anybody does not necessarily imply and sanction exploitative use of anything or anybody. As moral and ethical beings bound by the divine mandate humans serve as masters of creation with a sense of commitment and responsibility as servant leaders. In fact, in the Bible, the rules concerning the use of land, animal, and human resources on the Sabbath day and the Sabbatical year are evidence of the notion of preservation and rejuvenation of the earth's resources (Exodus 23: 10 - 12). The idea is that these practices would contribute to sustaining resources, prevent them from being damaged and subsequently make them more effective by giving them time and opportunity to rekindle their nutrients and energy. The outcome would be a revival of strength and productive capabilities. Further, in addition to such ideas of sustenance across time into the future, committing anything to waste was considered inappropriate, which means economising was also considered a virtuous quality. This is foregrounded by Tamari in his words, "The needs of future generations will have to be considered; after all, humankind is the guardians of God's world. Waste of natural resources, whether privately owned or nationally owned is forbidden" (51).

Another ethical dimension that can be fore-grounded is that while progress was rationally understood by the Jews and eschewing covetousness, lending on interest was also forbidden by the Judaic Law. The primary contention was that the person who borrowed was in a lower state of material well-being. So, extracting any surplus out of lending, retaining collaterals, especially necessities beyond certain limits, was considered exploitative (Leviticus 25:37; Deuteronomy 24:6,13). While here, the act of lending on interest is used to highlight the problem of avarice and the need to guard oneself against it, the idea can

also be applied to the role of ethical standards in making economic choices that impact the material prosperity and well-being of all in society. Greed in any form and of any degree is fundamentally harmful, especially to the economically less fortunate members of our society. Any level of unfettered desire for wealth will be the source and the core cause that stalls any forward movement to achieve overall wellness in both material and non-material terms. Tamari refers to this as, "the evil inherent in greed," and proposes that religion (in this case, Judaism) can manage the challenge of greed as well as an economic evil. That is to say, it can, "train or educate the unbounded desire (in Hebrew "YetzerHarah") for wealth, so that market activities and patterns of consumption operate within a God given morality"(Tamari 45). In short, all these ancient Judaic prescriptions found in the Old Testament illustrate the critical role of religion on ethics and human behaviour.

## **6. Interaction between Religion and Social Sciences: From Unidirectionality to Multidirectionality**

Religion and spirituality have continued to influence human thinking, actions, and social interactions from time immemorial. The foundational purpose of religion, politics, economics, and psychology is to improve human life and transformation of human society. Among all these, religion and spirituality have been uniquely (even before the development of fields of knowledge such as politics, economics, and psychology) contributing to human progress for millennia.

Though the proponents and adherents of secularisation theory report a declining role of religion in the modern world, close observation of the interaction of religion in society reveals the ebbs and flows associated with its abiding and increasing presence in contemporary society in general. The secularists advocate for the separation of state and religion to eradicate and disconnect religion's influence by relying solely on ethics without a religious basis. Though ethics can stand independently of religion, the values it promotes (e.g., beneficence, nonmaleficence, right to autonomy, and justice)

are shared and taught by major religions even before ethics came into existence as a distinct field of philosophy. Almost all major religious traditions and teachings communicate those sacred ethical values through stories and teachings before individuals are exposed to ethics as a distinct field. In that sense, we believe ethics and religion have common grounds and coexist in society. We would argue that humans (as children) learn lessons about ethical principles related to right and wrong, good conduct, and respectful living in family and community mainly through religion and spirituality rather than through courses and lessons in ethics. Further, we observe that all major religions play a significant role in forming ethical consciousness, harmonious living, peace in the community, and the overall well-being of individuals and society.

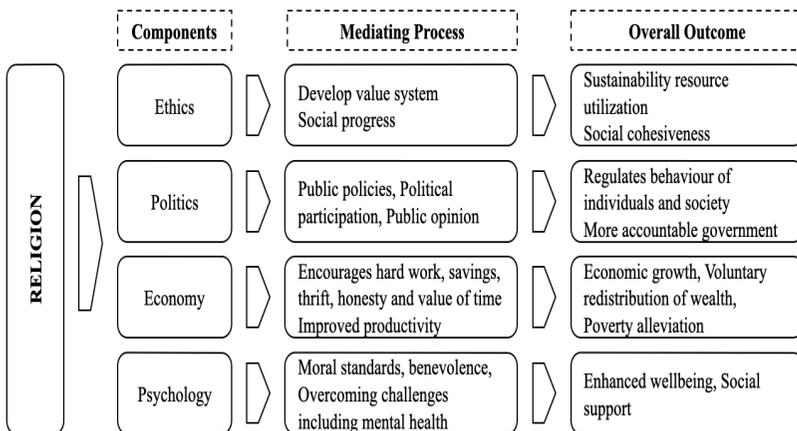


Figure 1: Unidirectional impact of religion on society

When focusing on religion’s influence, as reflected in social science literature, we observe that the influence of religion is presented in a unidirectional and linear way, as depicted in Figure 1. However, we argue that the interaction between religion and society is more multidirectional and circular, influencing and affecting each other, as presented in Figure 2. As an independent institution, religion is subject to government policies and regulations, just like any other firm or household. Therefore, the development in socio-economic, political, cultural,



such economies to obtain higher tax revenues to be used for developmental activities.

Historically, religion and politics have been inseparable, and they have been entirely separate at other times. They are inextricably linked because religious considerations have always played a role in political decisions, such as politicians consulting God through priests and prophets. This is because, in the pre-modern society, the laws were considered divine commands, the government was sacral, and the economic behaviour was governed by the sacred. In the modern world, politicians use religion for various reasons: To gain influential access to people and their vote banks; to combat political threats and opposition; and be perceived as moral, trustworthy, and religious (Beyers 142-164). However, in the contemporary world, the relationship between politics and religion can be varied and seen through three distinct relationships (Moyser): a) political authorities controlling religious institutions; b) religious leaders prescribing/influencing political authorities; and; c) politics and religion coexisting (i.e., a separation between Church and state).

Modernisation has led to changes and adaptations in religion and its interpretations. For example, within Roman Catholic Church, as part of modernisation (*aggiornamento*), which resulted from the interaction with modern society, several changes happened in its doctrines and pastoral outreach. In that sense, the convening of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was a significant historical landmark resulting in the promulgation of the sixteen council documents.

When changes happen in religion, certain groups within religious traditions create sects to preserve the originality of religion. When the Roman Catholic Church adapted to changes in the modern world, there were reactionary movements within the Church to preserve the pre-Vatican council traditions. We see a similar change happening in Hinduism. For instance, Lucia talks about how innovation and new proselytisation are happening in Hinduism and how gurus tailor messages in Hinduism to attract the contemporary world, primarily focusing on Western cultures (221-263). When we examine the influence

of modernisation on Islam, there is a decline in the percentage of prayer offerings, a reduction in the recitation of religious books and religious practices, etc. (Menhas 23-28). This is where the idea of Weber's secularisation hypothesis gains its relevance to a certain extent where due to modernisation, there is a growing tendency among individuals to depend on and believe in the power of science and rational analysis to solve various challenges in life (Inglehart). Moreover, it also affected the value systems of Islam, including the Purda system and the creation of sects responsible for internal conflicts among the Muslims (Menhas 23-28).

The modern-day development saga poses questions such as whether it is right to harm the environment, burden the upcoming generations, or even hinder the lives of other species for the sake of economic development; whether the actions undertaken to achieve growth compromise integrity (Freidman). Hence, it is evident that ethics brings moral consensus to gain economic growth, thereby encouraging sustainable development. Also, advanced societies possess a commitment towards fairness and ethical development. In addition, ethical components influenced by religion also affect politics. For example, political morality leads to policies that aim at controlling and improving public moral standards, eschewing the ideas around homosexuality, prostitution, pornography, nudity, trafficking of human bodies, abortion, etc. (Chakraborty 1099-1108).

While arguing that religion could be a positive catalyst to individuals' well-being due to its multidirectional relation, there are many grey areas to be discussed. While religion and spirituality primarily promote ideals and values that promote harmonious living and peace in society, some religious texts have advocated for violence and separation from other communities and groups. This can be confusing. For instance, secularists have justly pointed out that many ethnic and national conflicts worldwide may be trickled down to interpretations of religious teachings.

Similarly, there are negative externalities arising out of the individual-centric and self-motivated economic activities about production, consumption, distribution, and exchange. The increase in income inequality and relative poverty levels could be taken as a good case to argue. The question here is to what extent religion plays a role in enhancing the level of well-being as there could be negative consequences of economic progress. We argue that the understanding of religion in its true sense will help people to build a more conducive environment for harmonious living. Besides, the Government, through its policymaking can address the impact of negative externalities created to a great extent.

In the face of 'inherent problems' in religious texts and communities; and when dialogue and collaboration efforts with social sciences and other disciplines become more challenging, a new understanding of religion is in order. In such challenging contexts, we need to see how religion and spirituality are conceptualised and approached. The problem may lie in how social sciences are influenced by secularism. While proponents of secularisation theories view religion as a set of outdated traditions, rituals, and practices that are beginning to lose their relevance in contemporary society, the adherents of religion and spirituality view the living, dynamic, inspiring, and life-giving power of religion and spirituality leading to individuals' well-being and human society's transformation.

## **7. Sustainable Development: Enhanced by Multidirectional Interaction**

Sustainable development can be simply defined as "a desire to create a society that is safe, prosperous, and ecologically minded" (Caradonna 2). This definition aligns with the sustainable development goals (SDGs) of the United Nations, which has identified seventeen specific target areas intended to contribute to a better, more sustainable future for all.

From an ethical perspective, sustainable development raises critical questions about growth and development processes; and ethical concerns such as inequality and denial of social justice,

freedom, and choice. It aspires to provide a good life to all so that a good society can be envisioned. So, the pursuit of sustainability turns out to be a fight for justice for all individuals and groups. Hence sustainability foregrounds a comprehensive view of development wherein, along with its rather explicit economic indicator, it also extends to several social dimensions so that all individuals and communities enjoy varied and civilised life. With the integration of religious guidelines, sustainable development efforts get further clarity on what it means to uphold and practice universal human values, virtues, and norms about fair means of earning and spending. Such integration helps humans clarify what upholds equality, justice, and the absence of exploitation. Further, sustainable development demands the judicious use of wealth and resources without compromising on the foresight to prepare for future generations. We believe that the healthy interaction and collaboration between religion and social sciences can add value and contribute significantly to the development and practice of sustainable development philosophy.

## **8. Conclusion**

Profound truths and perennial philosophies for transforming individuals, communities, and society are contained in major religions' sacred scriptures and teachings. Eminent religious scholars down the centuries have expounded them from those religious traditions, especially in Vedanta in Hindu traditions, the Dhamma Teachings in the Buddhist Tripitaka, Judeo-Christian Sacred Scriptures, and Islam's Qur'an, to name a few major religious traditions. For social scientists to understand religion's perennial teachings, there must be basic *theological literacy* and collaboration with religious scholars. Without theological literacy, engaging with the meaning and insights of the sacred texts written centuries ago will not be easy. With the investigative spirit of collaborative social sciences and accurate interpretation of the sacred scriptures by religious scholars, humans can aspire for personal transformation within a just

society where every person's dignity and fundamental rights are upheld and celebrated.

Healthy and unadulterated religious and spiritual teachings create healthy communities, liberate individuals from narcissism and self-absorption, and help them be other-centered and community oriented. Such healthy communities create synergy by bringing in human talents, creativity, other-centeredness, and compassion to benefit the community and a healthy society. Religion and spirituality have consistently facilitated such coming together of humans and the development of various fields of knowledge, as we discussed earlier.

Religion and social sciences collaboratively, not exclusively and independently, have the power to unleash enormous energy and dynamism to bring forth positive transformation in human society. Through their multidirectional interaction, they enrich each other and become relevant to contemporary society. Together, they can serve the needs of humans' bio-psycho-sociocultural and spiritual needs. Their respectful and diligent interactions, facilitated by deep dialogue and creativity, can address many contemporary challenges, answer compelling questions and solve human problems. These rich and diverse interactions need to be captured, accounted for, and documented by future studies with an interdisciplinary focus to understand their significance in human lives.

Religion provides clear guidelines for care for the planet and direction for equitable distribution of resources. With the help of these guidelines and the support of social sciences, humans can effectively work towards sustainable development for the current and future generations. Therefore, we advocate for collaborative work between social sciences and religion. The dynamic and synergy-focused multidirectional interaction between religion and social sciences by scholars and practitioners with integrity can be our hope for the future.

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