



# Morality and spirituality: The missing link for economic development in the 21st century

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Whilst religion may have been of relevance in the quest for material prosperity and economic advancement in the 16th century, it seems not to have such importance today. The declining rate of organised religion and the growth of secularism around the world progressively lead many to believe that if there is any truth particularly relevant for this century, it is no longer found in religion. In this paper, we argue that global leadership deficiencies and corruption (glaring as they may be) are not the root causes for the economic development challenges currently faced in Southern Africa and the rest of the world. They are simply the result of the root cause, which we maintain is a decline in moral and spiritual values in society, and unless national governments make some meaningful progress in these realms, this generation is headed for serious economic trouble.

## Introduction

Contemporary economic predictions suggest that a global economic crisis is imminent. Some writers like Snyder (2013) believe that this imminent crisis might perhaps be even worse than that of the Great Depression of the 1930s. This is true because the United States and Europe are currently dealing with unprecedented debt problems. Their financial markets are falling apart and, among other issues, the prices of basic goods are soaring. Researchers of the U.S. development problematic, such as Heffner (2013) has correctly diagnosed that

[t]he United States is facing economic disaster on a scale few nations have ever experienced. Most people are unaware of the easily observable signs of this crisis, where it came from and how to stop it. While we persist in our superpower mentality, we have quietly become a second-class country in many respects.

The Eurozone financial crisis is even worse. In a NEPAD (The New Partnership for Africa's Development) business forum held in Johannesburg, South Africa, the deputy governor of the South African Reserve bank explained that the fiscal metrics of many Euro-area countries have been deteriorating in the past 5 years. This culminated in the bailing out of Ireland and a troika programme for Greece, including a very significant write-off. Most Euro-area countries have debt to gross domestic product (GDP) ratios in excess of 60%, and these include even the stronger anchor countries such as Germany and France. In the case of Greece; Ireland; Italy; Portugal and Spain, Kganyago (2012) explained that the fiscal situation also got reflected in higher borrowing costs that made any fiscal stimulus a non-option for policy makers. It was realised in this forum that the increasing financial crisis in Europe has a tremendous negative impact on Africa's economy in many ways. For instance, since the financial crisis set in, Africa's export growth rate has declined from 7.0% between 2000 and 2007 to only 1.4% between 2008 and 2010. This is indeed a significant slow-down. Clearly, the world is heading towards a serious financial storm.

In response to this situation, the tough question to ask, simply stated, is this: what is the fundamental reason for the upsurge of economic development in Southern Africa and around the world today? For many leaders and researchers of the development problematic of this generation, the cause is leadership deficiency. Thus, in his address at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon pointed at leadership as the crux of the problem as he stressed:

We need new vision, bold action, powerful partnerships for enduring peace and prosperity. That is why I call for a new multilateralism ... A multilateralism that couples power with pragmatic principles, recognising that, in our interconnected world, the well-being of any one nation depends, to an increasing degree, upon the well-being of all.

The term 'multilateralism' as used by Mr. Ban describes the efforts of nations coming together to combat a certain issue for the general good. Keohane (1990:731–764) explains that it refers to 'the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states'. So this new

multilateralism, as advocated by Mr Ban, should focus on delivering global goods: freedom from hunger, health and education and security from terror or the threat of Armageddon.

To others, like Trueblood (1998:xi), The problem is not fundamentally leadership but something even worse, as he noted:

[T]he greatest problems of our time are not technological, for these we handle fairly well. They are not even political or economic, because the difficulties in these areas, glaring as they may be, are largely derivative. The greatest problems are moral and spiritual, and unless we can make some progress in these realms, we may not even survive. This is how advanced cultures have declined in the past. (p. xi)

We admit that both the ostensive economic downturn that we now face and the imminent challenges that the global economy must tackle have been significantly influenced by the way leaders attempt to secure long-term prosperity for their communities. But as public theologians, we agree with Trueblood (1998:xi) that a decline in moral and spiritual values in our communities is the root cause for the increasing economic crisis in Southern Africa and around the world today. Therefore, in this article, we set out to argue for morality and spirituality as the missing link for economic development in this generation. We have three fundamental concerns in this paper. Firstly, we answer the question; what role does morality play in economic development; secondly, what role does spirituality play in economic development; thirdly we want to find out how moral and spiritual values can permeate society for development; and finally we end with some suggestions and recommendations towards global development.

## The role of morality in economic development

Some political economists such as North (1981:59–70) and Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson (2001:1369–1401) have taught that industrial and economic downturns are a by-product of history, especially in areas where there are despotic governments or where the rich exploit the poor. Most of the countries which have suffered from these vices also fail in many aspects of collective human behaviour today. Thus, Tabellini (2012) believes that shaping the function of these nations today needs moral values. Morality in this context, according to Tabellini (2012), is

defined as individual values and convictions about the scope of application of norms of good conduct – ... an important factor in individual behaviour and thus economic outcomes. Such values evolve slowly so they are an important channel through which distant political history can influence current economic performance.

He argues that the conceptions of what is right and wrong and how one ought to behave in specific circumstances, exert a strong influence on human behavioural aspects and that this directly affects economic outcomes. These

were, basically, the teachings of the 16th century Protestant reformers, and they eventually led to the greatest economic advances and prosperity ever experienced in Europe and North America. These Reformed teachings came to be known as the Protestant work ethic: a view of life

that promotes hard work and self-discipline as a means to material prosperity. It is called Protestant because some Protestant groups believe that such prosperity is a sign of God's grace. (American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy 2005)

Through these teachings, the Reformers taught that laziness was morally wrong and that reformed Christianity requires hard work and diligence which will not only enhance character traits such as being reliable and having initiative, but also prosperity. Max Weber (2001:13–38) attributed the capitalist revolution to the Protestant work ethic. He believed that these Protestant ethical values (especially as taught by Calvinism) influenced a large number of people to engage in work in the secular world, which eventually led them to develop their own business enterprises and engage in profitable trades that brought wealth and prosperity to many. Regrettably today, some scholars such as the French Philosopher Andre Gorz (1989:13–22) believe that the Protestant work ethic with its tenets on morality is obsolete and no longer needed for modern man. But given the imminent financial panic threatening the global economy, we argue strongly that, unless the need for moral and spiritual values is taken seriously today, this generation may not survive. There is therefore a serious need for a moral economic system today.

## A moral economy for global economic development

Sayer (2000) defines moral economy as the

study of how economic activities of all kinds are influenced and structured by moral dispositions and norms and how, in turn, those norms may be compromised, overridden or reinforced by economic pressures. (pp. 79–103)

A moral economy, in other words, is an economy that is based on goodness, fairness, and justice. In fact, according to Booth (1994:653–67), all economies that are not merely pre- or non-capitalist are moral economies. Such an economy is needed in countries like South Africa, which understands the values of *Ubuntu*, as it would strengthen the spirit of communalism between nations with bigger economies and those with smaller economies as the one fairly 'scratches the back' of the other and vice versa. This type of economy is certainly what is needed to put African nation states and the wider world on a firm path to a promising economic development.

Scholars like John Health (2001:4–18) have argued for the relevance of a moral economy along these lines. He cites Canada as a living example of a nation whose attempts to balance social needs and economic freedom make it a shining example of a nation close to being a moral economy (Health 2001:4–18). Other economists, such as Powelson (1998:6) also

believe that the efficacy of a moral economy today would help strike a balance between economics and healthy ethical norms in the name of social justice. Brown and Garver (2009:21–56) have also sounded an urgent need for the world to consider a moral economy as an essential step towards avoiding an imminent economic collapse. Therefore, we make a strong case for a moral economic system in Africa and the rest of the world as a helpful salvation plan from the impending economic woes. This is more consistent with the deepest human values and gives every nation a fair opportunity towards economic development.

## The role of spirituality in economic development

Spirituality, according to Sheldrake (2007:1–2), refers to the ‘deepest values and meanings by which people live’. These values include meditation, prayer and contemplation, which are aimed at developing an individual’s inner life. Cousins (1992:xiii, 3) argues that spirituality puts ultimate faith in an alleged immaterial reality which helps people to discover the essence of their being. Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002:xiii) further explain that spiritual experiences include being connected to a larger reality, yielding to a more comprehensive self, joining with other individuals or the human community, relating with nature or the universe, or being connected to the divine realms. Waaijman (2002:1) adds that spirituality is often experienced as a source of inspiration or orientation in life which includes belief in immaterial realities or experiences of the transcendent nature of the world. The origin of the term spirituality, according to scholars such as Jones (1997:4), dates as far back as the 5th century, but entered into common use only in the Middle Ages. Even though many enlightenment thinkers came to express their scepticism on the value of spirituality in society and rather spread the ideas of modernity, the value of spirituality survived, mainly through the works of scholars such as Emerson (who pioneered the idea of spirituality as a distinct discipline – James 2008; Otto 2004; Schmidt 2012). Other scholars, such as Paul Heelas (1996:1–60), Chris Griscom (1988:47–55) and Shirley MacLaine (1990:61–76) also contributed greatly towards developing the idea of spirituality as a distinct discipline.

Today, there is a broader view of spirituality due to the declining membership of organised religion and the growth of secularism in the world. Modern secularism has now introduced a form of spirituality known as secular spirituality which emphasises humanistic ideas on qualities such as love, compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, responsibility, harmony, and a concern for others with the express purpose of living happily and of helping others. In a more modern sense therefore, spirituality could be explained as a concept that

exists wherever we struggle with the issues of how our lives fit into the greater scheme of things. This is true when our questions never give way to specific answers or give rise to specific practices such as prayer or meditation. We encounter spiritual issues every time we wonder where the universe comes from, why we are here, or what happens when we die. We also become

spiritual when we become moved by values such as beauty, love, or creativity that seem to reveal a meaning or power beyond our visible world. An idea or practice is ‘spiritual’ when it reveals our personal desire to establish a felt-relationship with the deepest meanings or powers governing life. (see Fuller 2001)

Living a happy, prosperous and fulfilled life has always been the aspiration of man. Regrettably, with the unprecedented developments in science and technology today, Ikeda (2001: 1–60) argues that many believe this material progress is enough to bring man the desired happiness such that the value of spiritual development for human happiness has greatly deteriorated. But we strongly argue that, without a proper sense of interconnectedness, no level of material prosperity can bring about meaningful happiness among people. Gasset (1961:45) expresses the idea of interconnectedness in this way: ‘I am myself plus my circumstance, and if I do not save it, I cannot save myself.’ It is therefore imperative that, if we are to see meaningful development in our time, we must move from a mentality of individualistic competition to one of cooperation based on the interconnectedness of all life. Ikeda and Peccei (1984:104) have called this move a ‘human revolution’ which changes the inner nature of each person to bring about development in the society. This implies that, developing our external world for the better also requires the internal transformation of people who are willing to lead, in order to bring about such ostensive developments. A good example to cite in this regard would be Mahatma Gandhi whose life as an Indian leader of social reform was driven by an inner faith in truth, non-violence, and a life of service to others. Gandhi believed that ‘all religions were manifestations of the Truth and that people of different faiths should and could live in peace and harmony’ (Nair 1994). This would certainly result to the economic betterment of all men. The need therefore for spirituality for ostensive economic development cannot be overemphasised.

## A spiritual economy for global economic development

We maintain that it is now myopic to still hold that a market-driven economy is what the world needs in order to maintain sustainable development. This is because one need not be a genius to realise that the capitalist economic system as practiced today is at its crisis point. Therefore, there is a need for a more humane economy that considers human well-being in the development discourse; a spiritual economy would fill that need. Steiner (1986:164) is a notable proponent on the concept of a spiritual economy. He first made mention of this concept in 1908 in Berlin where he related it to his investigation about the spiritual guidance of human beings and humanity. A spiritual economy should pose as a foundation on which economic development rests, the former being the cause and the latter the effect. Gordon Davidson (2012) correctly outlines the relevance of spiritual economy towards development as follows:

1. Sustaining, nurturing and protecting the living planet and all life within it, including humans, is the core principle for a new spiritual economic system.



2. Everyone on the Earth has a right to a healthy existence. This means any economic system should be designed to provide everyone with the basics of food, shelter, clothing, education, and health care.
3. Everyone has the right to earn their livelihood by contributing their gift to the whole. The spiritual and economic flourishing of any society is based on the true contributions of each individual being welcomed, rewarded and integrated into the whole.
4. Those with greater gifts need to dedicate themselves to helping others develop their talents and gifts. The encouragement and support for developing the unique contributions of each individual is a central purpose of a spiritual economy.
5. 'The health and well-being of the entire system is essential to the health and well-being of each individual. The individual and the whole are linked in an interdependent relationship of reciprocal mutuality. The whole provides a place in the web of living relationships that supports the well-being of the individual, and the individual's contribution enhances the whole.
6. All systems will self-correct if the underlying life is free to circulate and reorganize itself. Rigid systems blocking circulation for the benefit of the few at the expense of the many cannot be sustained. Once blockages are removed, life will self organise into new, more open and free-flowing systems, providing full circulation to all parts of the whole.
7. Goods and services imbued with spiritual intent and quality will be in greater demand in a spiritual economy. With an increasing spiritual awakening, the spiritual essence within and around particular goods and services will be perceived and valued' (Davidson 2012).

In the face of the increasing economic tension in Africa and around the world today, these spiritual principles ought to serve as enunciating principles that offer us torchlight on our pathway out of the economic swamps of fear, uncertainty and confusion. Once government leaders and businessmen come to understand this, the world will enter a period in which our economic system will be redesigned, leading to one that is meaningful and sustainable.

## Religion as a catalyst for moral and spiritual values for development

Even though spirituality and religion have certain overlapping characteristics – such as both being concerned with the search for an absolute being, there are some characteristic differences between the two. Religion, according to the Dalai Lama (1999:237), is often understood as a tradition that accepts metaphysical or supernatural realities, whilst spirituality is not necessarily bound to any particular tradition. Other scholars, such as Thompson (1981:103), have in other words suggested that 'religion is the form spirituality takes in a civilisation'. This explains why the term 'spirituality' is now frequently used in contexts where the term 'religion' was formerly employed (James 1985; Gorsuch & Miller 1999).

Despite the fact that a reasonable proportion of today's population identify themselves as spiritual but not religious (Fuller 2001), we argue that the overlapping characteristics of religion and spirituality cannot be ignored in considering a way forward for the permeation of our world with a morality and spirituality that will bring about sustainable development. Indeed, religion should be seen as a catalyst for morality and spirituality in the decay around us. The concluding section of this paper provides the reader with a few suggestions and recommendations on how governments and civil institutions can use religion to this end.

## Conclusion, suggestions and recommendations

If Trueblood (1998) is right in attesting that a decline in morality and spirituality poses the greatest threat to development, then the necessity for a moral and spiritual revival in our communities today should not just be the concern of different religious organisations or a thesis argued by Protestantism. It should also be of top priority in the agenda of governments today, otherwise there will be no nation to rule in the long run. Since religious organisations are the main authorities on matters pertaining to morality and spirituality, it is imperative that governments and civil institutions work closely with religion in achieving an upsurge in morality and spirituality today. To this end, we suggest the need for enforcement towards a more active Christian ecumenism (Christian movement fostering unity among churches and distinct religious groups) and interfaith pluralism (a religious movement that seeks to promote tolerance, mutual respect and cooperation among the world's religions); one that acknowledges the differences in the values of each body, but that seeks to unite on a common goal of salvaging our generation from the moral and spiritual canker now permeating into our communities. Government should invest in setting up a centre for interfaith dialogue which will spearhead the fight against moral and spiritual decadence in our communities.

We hold that the fight against moral and spiritual decline in our generation today cannot be effectively won through public policies or parliamentary rulings; it is a spiritual problem that has manifested in the physical realms and so requires spiritual measures to tackle it. Prayer cannot be overemphasised; through the centre for Christian ecumenism and interfaith pluralism, nationals need to pray for national and international revivals. Prayers should be offered for God to change the hearts of many wicked men in our communities, one at a time. Prayers should be made for God to transform (and in cases resist, dethrone) ruthless and godless leaders in politics, in our court rooms, business enterprises and the entertainment industry, amongst others. Religious organisations that come up with projects directly aimed at promoting moral and spiritual sanity in society should be identified and supported by the centre. These centres should also be well supported by the government, especially financially, so that their projects in support of interest groups working to this end can be successful.



Young men and women in religious circles should be encouraged (through financial and material support from these centres) to come up with ministries and non-profit religious organisations that aim at influencing their peers towards a moral and spiritual sanity. We believe that this is especially important because the most affected group today is the youth. Unless something is done to salvage them, the future is very much under threat. What is the future for the economy and for society if the putative leaders of tomorrow are seriously lost in the abyss of immorality? What kind of leaders will they make if many now see right as wrong and wrong as right? What kind of leaders will they make for our world if they increasingly precipitate their own demise by losing out on the key values of faith, family and community and rather hold on to a self-destructive claim to the freedom to do whatever they wish whenever they wish to? Has this path not succeeded only in exposing many young people to drug addiction, teenage pregnancy and sexual immorality with its ostensive results such as the upsurge in HIV and Aids and the likes? Southern Africa is regarded as the worst affected region in Africa and the epicentre of the global HIV pandemic. Swaziland is believed to have the highest HIV prevalence rate in the region with Botswana, Lesotho and South Africa following respectively. Studies point fingers at multiple sex partners as one of the key drivers of HIV transmission in this region, and we believe this is so because of a decline in moral and spiritual consciousness in the society. Clearly, our future is bleak if we do nothing; we therefore have to save our future by saving mostly the young generation from moral and spiritual decadence.

In the Christian religion, for instance, highly motivated young pastors and ministers in Africa and around the world are increasingly establishing churches and organisations that aim not only at teaching the Bible, but also at influencing mostly young people towards a moral and spiritual regeneration and a change of mindset towards meaningful careers and economic prosperity. It is little wonder that some of these Christian ministers are often referred to as life coaches, motivational speakers and the likes. Such organisations and churches should be encouraged and supported by governments to do even more through the proposed centres for interfaith dialogues. The lives of many young people have been positively affected by these Christian ministries, and the poverty-stricken mindset, especially in many nations in Africa, is increasingly giving way to a prosperity mentality. Pessimism too is giving way to economic optimism and low self-esteem is giving way to a belief in the self and the faith that with God they can become great in their time. Many who were suffering from drug addictions have been helped; those without a purpose in life now lead a purpose-driven life. All this has greatly improved on the economic standards of many lives and communities in Africa and around the world.

Since the need for a contemporary moral and spiritual revival is also crucial for the future of nationals in Africa

and the rest of the world, governments should not see this move as stand-alone projects and visions put forward by individuals. These projects should also be the major task of governments and, since there are many young men and individuals already doing something in this regard, national governments simply need to invest by supporting these churches and organisations. With enough funds so acquired, they will be able to expand the vision of their ministries to affect a wider community. What good would it be if all state resources were to be invested in education, technology and politics but then eventually collapse because of a lack of moral and spiritual values? It is only when much has been invested in ensuring a moral and spiritual revival in people that we can have confidence in the stability and expansion of other sectors of society. We seriously recommend, therefore, that governments in Southern Africa and the rest of the world should take as top priority the need to invest in ameliorating moral and spiritual decadence in our society, for again, as Trueblood (1998:xi) noted, 'unless we make some progress in these realms, we may not even survive. This is how advanced cultures have declined in the past.

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### Authors' contributions

G.K. (University of South Africa) was responsible for the conceptualisation of the argument made in this article, while R.S.T. (University of South Africa) was involved in the partial application of that idea.

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