

A Study of Overpopulation and Ecological Suicide: How Religion Plays a Role

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Abstract

The damage of overpopulation gives a warning toward ecological issue. The massive number of human population could not be defined as an advantage at all, moreover with the imbalance of development and migration. Every human being are consuming and taking space for living. Lessons from many ecological disasters have been occurred across the globe. Some scholars are addressing religion as one of the source toward the ecological crisis. Meanwhile some other are distinguishing between world religion and indigenous religion and accusing world religion as the problem toward ecological crisis, and indigenous religion is a way closer and attach to the nature. This paper will study the overpopulation of human and it's impact toward ecological suicide. In addition, religion in this context, will be analyzed whether it has a role, either as trigger, booster (religious justification), or solution. By using literature study and descriptive analysis, this paper is presenting the overview of religions role toward ecological crisis to give insight on how to understanding and practicing religion to make sure the demography bonus doesn't led to overpopulation and gives bad impact toward ecological suicide.

Keywords: Overpopulation, Ecology, Religion

Introduction

The demographic bonus is an advantage which is sometimes granted to a country. Basically, demography is the study of the human population and the factors that influence it, such as birth, death, and life expectancy (Green, 2008). Demographics calculate the

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demographic age of a country. Japan and some European countries for example, are considered old, meaning there are more elderly people than teenager. In a number of countries, like many in the Middle East, there are more teenagers than elder people (Green, 2008). These statistics or numerical facts can help to predict population growth in certain areas of the future although it also has important consequences for the people living in the place. Society could not deny, the number of population-based statistics greatly determine lifestyles and policies of the authorities. It is also a massive effect on the environment. Demographic bonus also potentially leads to overpopulation that refers to the growth of the human population to a size that causes problems for people or their environment. If there are so many people in one area that it is difficult for them to find resources such as food, water, or shelter, it means the area is too densely populated. Like Hong Kong, overpopulation can make cities too noisy or air polluted (Green, 2008). Therefore, it is important to observe and find solutions to the effects of overpopulation.

One solution to human overpopulation is to reduce the number of births. Cockram (1972) mentions that in some places like Asia, China, and Latin America, religion has strengthened traditional trends to extended families. It also makes India impose sterilization to reduce population growth rate. Meanwhile religious institutions are relatively problematic, although many religions still prohibit abortions, but for birth control, they do not problematize. For people in the Western world who are embraced in population control, one of the best actions seems to lie in working with established religious groups and using modern methods to shape attitudes. In a non-Western world, the relative fragmentation of religious groups is their lack of psycho-social organizations and traditions which seem to limit their direct effectiveness to population control policies (Ehrlich & Ehrlich, 1972).

Meanwhile, ecology as a discussion in this paper addresses environmental issues and efforts to articulate a comprehensive religious and philosophical outlook because in basic, ecology is the awareness and experience of ourselves, again as Luke (1999) gives deep attention to ecology from the tradition of Eastern spiritual processes such as Taoism and Buddhism, which have cultural context have a relation between ecology and sociocultural grounds. At another level, this tradition embraces organic unity with nature. Therefore there is a debate among scholars about the dichotomy of western and eastern religions, between the religion of the heavens and the religion of the earth, between world religions and indigenous religions.

A. Indigenous Religion and Ecology

Religion is a powerful way in which society organizes their world view and shapes human behavior. In this case, the indigenous believer community considers nature with a sense of wonder and respect (Marten, 2008). They regard human beings as integral parts of nature, and not superior to other creatures. Meanwhile Western religions think of humans as having unique character possessing authority over nature, as well as responsibility for their integrity. However, the behavior of

respect for nature grows again with the advent of environmental problems. Therefore religious belief is the belief that religion knows about what is important in our lives. Religion offers guidance on right and wrong. The importance of such guidance is necessary on human-environmental interactions. Religions significantly have different perceptions about human relationships with nature and significantly different guidelines to guide human interaction with the environment.

Initially, spirits are a major part of all religions. The belief in the spirit continues to be common in all societies, regardless of religion, until the spirit is replaced by modern science. Marten (2008) provides many examples of religions in indigenous societies that are still based on spirit, and spirit religion. For example, Australian aborigines are nomadic hunters and gatherers with well-defined territories and strong emotional and spiritual attachments to the land where they live. The Aborigines believe that they have a responsibility to help maintain this creative process by performing rituals and making offerings to help preserve the ancestral spirits on the ground (Marten, 2008).

The traditional religion of Native Americans also includes the belief that land formations, plants and animals have spirits. All living things are the same inhabitants of the Earth equally. The whole world and everything in it is sacred, worthy of admiration and respect. Even animals have awareness, feelings and personality like humans. Prayers and gifts for spirits are a routine part of everyday life. When collecting plants or hunting animals, Native Americans saying thanks to the nature and apologize for killing their lives (Marten, 2008).

Ainu is a hunter-gatherer in northern Japan. Ainu thinks humans and gods are different in many ways, they consider humans and gods have the same abilities and relationship. Gods could give things to human beings what humans want, and humans can present the things to the god what the god wants. Gods live in their own world, but they often visit the human world in animal form. When a hunter kills an animal, actually there is a god inside the animal's body. God provides the beast's body to the hunter, and God returns to his own world. As a return for the animal's body gift, Ainu presents wine and sticks beautifully carved to the gods in a festival which could hold for days (Marten, 2008).

B. Eastern Religion and Ecology

Major Eastern religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism are similar to spiritual religions because spirits are part of their worldview. However, the major religions are different from the religious spirits because the myths and dogmas of the major religions are preserved in written form (Marten, 2008). Spiritual religions are oral traditions whose stories have transferred from one generation to another through stories in oral.

Hinduism is an eastern religion that recognizes karma, karma in Hinduism tradition says that all human thoughts, words and deeds affect everything in the world around it and will re-affect the person back (Marten, 2008). Hindus make

daily offerings (food) to God so that the Earth will pleasure and will continue to provide what they need. Nature is very important in Hindu theology. Hindus regard trees and forests as sacred because they have given many things to the gods in Hindu mythology. Many animals are considered sacred, especially cow because of their role for humans.

Buddhism has a philosophical idea that the main cause of suffering is demanding things we could not have (Marten, 2008). Therefore the use of natural resources should be limited to meet basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter and medicines. Then another form of mainstream idea of Buddhism is respect, compassion and love for all life forms. Animals should not be killed and plants should be harvested only to meet basic food needs.

Chinese religion believes that the universe is harmonious and complete. Marten (2008) explains that according to the Chinese, the universe is like a large living thing. Activities that potentially damage the landscape are prohibited because they can hurt or offend dragons or other powerful spirits that live in the homeland. Taoism and Confucianism are two distinct streams from the Chinese. Tao emphasizes that nature is mysterious beyond comprehension. For Confucianism, humans are the children of nature. Tao believes that humans must do their best by changing nature as little as possible and must be in harmony with the rhythm and flow of nature and harnessing energy, not by dominating nature or controlling it. Confucianism emphasizes social relationships, the need for people to develop and improve their shared responsibilities. The right attitude toward nature is a devotion just as worthy as respect for parents. Since human beings have a sibling relationship with other natural beings, humans have the responsibility of guarding nature to maintain the harmony of nature.

C. Western Religion and Ecology

Western religion began in the Middle East with Judaism. The main difference between Judaism and other religions during this time was the belief of Judaism in only one God (monotheism). Other religions have many gods that participate in creating the world and are constantly responsible for various parts of its function. Judaism believes that God created the world and rejected the worship of nature because Judaism connects the worship of nature in another religion with the belief in many gods even some considered worship to nature as heresy (*shirk*). God chose man as his representative to preserve God's wisdom on Earth and manage the Earth to meet their needs (Marten, 2008).

Early Christianity was also influenced by the ancient Greeks, who considered nature to be beautiful and harmonious. The Greek perception of nature is very different from Judaism, which considers nature to depend on God. The Christ teaches simple life with minimal ingredients. All living beings are his spiritual brothers and deserve the same love as Christ who advocated human brotherhood.

Christianity always emphasizes the relationship of human to each another and to God not the relationship of man or God to nature. For Christians, only humans have souls (Marten, 2008). It is mentioned in The New Testament which refers to the source of the God that gives life to the soul. Therefore, on the one hand the ecological crisis can be seen as a consequence of human effort to manifest itself through technological practice. On the other hand, the ecological crisis can be regarded as a consequence of the inability of man to abandon everything as it is (Huppenbauer, 2003). This perception implies acceptance of the limits of human activity. Human ecology is not what it is as long as we do not take into account the limits of it.

Islam is deeply influenced by Judaism and Christianity. Nature is considered as sacred because it is God's creation, and God's will is present in every detail. God grants human the privilege of using all of His creatures on Earth and the responsibility to care for them. The main message of Islamic law about human-environmental relationships is that people should not use more than they need, and should not be in vain with what they use. Land for livestock grazing, timber, and irrigation should be owned by the community collectively. Animals can only be killed if needed for food or are a threat to food crops or livestock, and when trees are cut, they must be replaced by planting other trees. Unfortunately, nature has never been a major concern of Islam, which considers the afterlife and the relation of everyone to God more important than the material world and the human temporal life on Earth (Marten, 2008).

Analysis

Religion in human life is important aspect. The rise of population is in line with the rise of religious person. The bigger population gives impact in bigger consumption. Therefore, the risk of resources obviously will be endangered. Meanwhile, religion teach human to live with certain rule, including the relation with nature even tough there are also a number of teaching from religion that force human to consume more resources to certain religious ritual. Does it make sense that religion has different interpretation according to the human itself? In this case, I argue that religion could be a trigger to ecological disaster, booster, even a solution.

A. Religion as Trigger

In many rituals, religion ask its follower to consume and using resources as its ritual, whether its daily activity or a festive. For example, Islam asks its follower to perform ablution (*wudhu*) before praying which is consuming clean water to wash certain part of body. The use of water, moreover in excessive way, is a clear sign of ecological unfriendly. Even though there is a dispensation for those who unable to find water by using dust, but this is just a small number. Islam also asks its follower to perform big bath after doing sex, or after period. The need of water for Islam is

in big number whereas it comes from the Arab peninsula, the desert land where water is very limited. Hinduism also teaches its follower to give alms (food) for the god daily, and the food just became a waste while many people need to be fed.

Islam also asks its follower to perform slaughter annually called Eid al-Adha festival. In this festive, Muslim is slaughtering a lot number of animal like cow, goat, camel, etc. Therefore, the number of consumed animal in this moment increased massively. Another festival in each religions consume another resources as it a command from the god to exploit the nature to pleasure the god. Every Christmas, Christian cut off Christmas tree to be put in their home. The example above is just a small number of religious instruction to perform ritual which is very ecological unfriendly.

B. Religion as Booster

The meaning of booster in this part is, religion doesn't give specific command to do something, but religious person find the justification from the teaching of religion and interpreted for their own purpose. For sure, this kind of booster comes from religion with holy book, or written tradition because they need the text to be interpreted. For example, to justify the greedy of consumption and exploiting nature, Muslim said that they have a stewardship (*khalifah*) on the earth. So they have responsibility in consuming the resources because they think they are maintaining it and having property on it. In other interpretation, the same verse about stewardship could be interpreted as the responsibility of Muslim to take care the earth as the representative of God on the earth.

Christianity and Judaism also face the same issue. A lot of debate on the interpretation of multi-meaning text from the holy books seems to be similar with Islam, for example, the slaughtering ritual, ablution, or another overconsumption in every religious festival. This shows the problem is not on the text of religion, but the person is. That is why, every religious person need to be aware about his opinion in quoting holy text to justify their act especially toward environment.

C. Religion as Solution

What indigenous people have shown is definitely interesting to be highlighted. Their worldview toward environment and nature is very different with world religion as they more attached to the nature and have a big responsibility toward the nature. Actually the world religion actually has the same potential to be attached to the nature also.

There are three keys to be a part of solution from religion toward ecological crisis; first is don't be greedy and overconsumption. This teaching is found in every world religion. Therefore, the follower needs to be aware about consuming

resources as they should not take it excessively. Second, give back what you have taken from the nature. If you cut off the tree, don't forget to plant it again. If you have slaughtering an animal, don't forget to taking care the other living animal to give birth and don't make it extinct. Third, if you could not do the first and the second, at least help people who concern in it. Respect the indigenous person, the volunteer, NGO, or another person who are involved in the issue. Don't do the vice versa.

Discussion

Despite the past decade we have witnessed an increase in the use of ecological data to map the impact of religion at the community level much of the research in this area has continued to be plagued by two major obstacles. First, ecological research on religion is often theoretically conducted, which prioritizes the structural character of religion while failing to show sensitivities to the substance of beliefs and religious values that are collectively owned. Secondly, ecological research often uses rough methodological techniques that ignore important differences in major religious collectivities, for example, variants of Protestantism, Catholicism in Christianity or Shi'ite Sunni in Islam (Blanchard et al. 2008). Ecological researchers are encouraged to take seriously the content of religious beliefs held collectively and show sensitivities to the peculiar world view that continues to sway in certain religious traditions.

Conclusion

Many people in industrialized countries today do not consider themselves religious in terms of participating actively in organized religion, but in fact, they have the belief that it deals with the same thing as organized religion. Marten (2008) said self-actualization, materialism and a coherent world view associated with capitalism, free enterprise, economic growth and the global economy become a central component of human worldview. Therefore shopping even hedonism has become a great ritual. Clerics become economic advisers, multinational corporations and entertainment celebrities. This development in our modern world has exceeded the consequences for human ecosystem interactions. Demands for consumer goods, and consequent demands for ecosystem services, are driven by socially consumptive needs that go far beyond those required for a decent life. On the other hand, more and more people feel a strong spiritual connection with the natural world independently of whether they participate in organized religion. Some have invested their spiritual energy in the green political movement. Some Westerners are interested in exploring eastern religions, Native American spirituality or other indigenous religions that have a striking focus on respect for nature. How the religious people should be thinking about? It doesn't matter which religion they belief as long as they don't be greedy and overconsumption because overpopulation with overconsumption is a catastrophe.

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