

INSPIRING PROGRESS

Religions' Contributions to
Sustainable Development

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I n t r o d u c t i o n

*"Fundamental progress has to do with
the reinterpretation of basic ideas."*

—Alfred North Whitehead^{1*}

Tony Deamer is an entrepreneur, inventor, and civic leader, a dynamo of progress in Vanuatu, a small island nation in the South Pacific. He runs a car dealership and an air charter service in the capital city of Port Vila, with 18 employees between the two businesses. He is developing a new kind of fuel to power the cars of Vanuatu. And he serves on the board of a local Bahá'í school and as president of the national Red Cross. Deamer cuts a familiar profile: millions of go-getters like him worldwide provided the financial capital, technological innovation, and civic leadership that generated unprecedented societal advances in the 20th century, advances that made the century synonymous with the word "progress."

But look closer and it's clear Deamer's activities have an added, 21st-century twist. His innovative "Island Fuel" is made from coconut oil, which burns more cleanly than petroleum—a reflection of his desire to "leave something behind for my kids, some hope of a greener future."² He believes in making an honest profit, but has no plans to patent the fuel, even after years of trial-and-error experimentation, in the hope that it can be made widely available and affordable. And his businesses employ as many women as men—including female

*Endnotes are grouped by chapter and begin on page 173.

mechanics—because of his commitment to gender equality. A modest man, Deamer does not make much of these practices. But framed as a set of principles, his approach to progress is decidedly cutting-edge: prosperity for Vanuatu should be environmentally resilient, broadly shared, and built on justice. Think of it as “progress-plus,” a progress inspired by ethics.

The ethical dimension of Deamer's vision comes from his Bahá'í faith, his spiritual home for 41 years. One of the youngest of the world religions, with roots in mid-19th century Persia, the Bahá'í faith stresses the unity of the human family, gender and racial equality, and the complementary importance of science and faith, among other precepts.³ And like many religions, it emphasizes service. “The desire to do something useful for the people around me is what drives my work,” Deamer explains, adding that for him, service is another form of worship.⁴

Deamer is a single individual in an isolated corner of the world. But his life story embodies both a challenge and a hope for human advancement in the 21st century. The challenge is to redefine “progress:” to revamp economies and societies to work in harmony with the natural environment and serve all people. The hope is that religious communities and religious leaders worldwide will recognize—as many increasingly do—the powerful contributions they can make to this work and lend their considerable influence to it. Engaging the world's religions in an effort to re-imagine human societies can help ensure that the gains of the 20th century spread to all people into the indefinite future.

The Need for Inspired Progress

Despite the contributions of economic pioneers like Tony Deamer over the last 100 years, the word “progress” has fallen on hard times. Human activities are changing the Earth's climate, draining whole rivers, scalping forests, and unleashing a mass extinction—the first since the dinosaurs died off 65 million years ago.⁵ The 20th century set records for organized violence, with more wartime deaths than in all previous centuries combined.⁶ And its cornucopian abundance is as shameful as it is dazzling, given the billions in the human

family who are left behind. These shortcomings are not just cranky footnotes to an otherwise stunning story of human achievement. Instead, they are major failures that threaten to unravel many of the great advances of the century.

A fundamental reassessment of the 20th century and a corresponding course correction are needed. Albert Einstein once noted that problems are not solved within the same mindset that created them, but require a fresh perspective. Indeed, the most important questions to guide a new vision of progress are not the “How” questions that fueled progress in the 20th century: how do we generate more revenue, more kilowatts, or more kilos per hectare, for example, although these remain important challenges.* More important are the elementary “What” questions: What is progress? What is the purpose of wealth? What is our proper relationship to other species, to other people, even to future generations? These questions were largely overlooked in the 20th century, or their answers were assumed to have been settled. But when widespread environmental and social dysfunctions—from a warming planet to a global obesity epidemic—threaten to remake whole societies for the worse, basic assumptions about progress demand a fresh look.

Progress as Bounded Creativity

A key argument of this book is that the impressive creativity of the 20th century lacked a strong set of ethical boundaries that could sustain progress over the long term and orient it toward prosperity for all. Human creativity was like a river without banks, the flow of innovation impressive but unchanneled. One missing riverbank was ecological wisdom, which might have helped us design human activities to work in step with nature. We built economies that were resource intensive, with an unprecedented toll on air, water, climate, and non-human species. The other absent bank was an ethic of human well-being, which might have helped rich and poor alike build more dignified and fulfilling lives. The poor suffer from persistent deprivation.

*Units of measure throughout this book are metric unless common usage dictates otherwise.

* progress, like a river, needs to be bounded - by ecological limits/wisdom. + by ethics.

vation, while many prosperous people are afflicted by the corrosive effects of excess wealth. Without the guiding wisdoms of ecology and well-being—essentially Tony Deamer's vision, writ large—human cleverness has sown the seeds of economic and social disintegration.

The need for boundaries to guide human endeavors is a long-established tenet of human wisdom. Philosophers and spiritual leaders across cultures and throughout history have taught the importance of restraint, of channeling human energies within ethical boundaries. "Moderation in all things" is the oft-quoted wisdom of the Roman playwright Terence. Buddhist philosophy and Bahá'í teachings stress "the middle way," with excess and deprivation equally decried. And Mahatma Gandhi drew on his Hindu heritage to elaborate "seven deadly sins," blessings turned toxic by a lack of restraint:

- wealth without work
- pleasure without conscience
- science without humanity
- knowledge without character
- politics without principle
- commerce without morality
- worship without sacrifice.⁷

In sum, the world's civilizations have promoted restraint for centuries as a moral check on individual and societal excess.

Some thinkers go further, however, and argue that restraint is not merely a moral adornment to human activities, but a necessary ingredient for lasting progress. Thomas Berry, a Catholic priest and the author of several books that reflect on the meaning of the cosmos, argues that energy and the countervailing force of gravity—a cosmological expression of restraint—have been fundamental to creativity since the birth of our universe. The tremendous energy released during the Big Bang needed the constraining power of gravity, to shape matter into a productive universe.⁸ Energy alone is diffuse and produces nothing, Berry notes, while discipline alone is rigid and lifeless. But in proper balance, the two can produce great creativity. For this reason, Berry argues, constraints, restraint, and boundaries are best understood as "liberating and energizing, rather than confining."⁹ This wisdom is confirmed daily in small and great

Moral + cosmic
similarity

ways, from the child who masters the piano only with the discipline of regular practice, to resource-constrained countries like Japan that build more diversified and resilient economies than, say, many oil-rich nations do.

Of course, boundaries or limits are not ends in themselves: too tight a constraint can easily stifle progress. Totalitarian governments and rigidly planned economies in the 20th century extinguished the creativity that is vital to being human. Progress in those societies advanced like water in cement canals, whose flow is well bounded but unable to seek its own course. Natural rivers, by contrast, tend to be serpentine, carving out new paths even as they are contained by riverbanks. A major developmental challenge for human societies this century will be to encourage the creativity that drives human progress, while guiding that energy away from waste and self-destruction.

Making Progress Sustainable

An alternative approach to progress seeks to build on the impressive gains of the 20th century, but within boundaries established by ecology and the requirements of well-being. Known to many as "sustainable development," the concept has an implied ethical foundation: it promotes a vision of economies and societies that work in harmony with the natural environment and that extend the benefits of progress to struggling peoples everywhere. It acknowledges that the long term matters, and that our children and grandchildren have a moral claim on how decision makers today pursue progress. And it agrees that humans are more than economic beings, and that our progress, therefore, involves more than creating ever-greater levels of wealth.

Since its international debut in 1988, in a report called *Our Common Future* (also known as the Brundtland Report), sustainable development has slowly gained acceptance as a viable alternative to the 20th-century approach to progress. Defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs," the concept was endorsed at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and re-affirmed at countless international gatherings since then.¹⁰ And specific economic initiatives consistent with sustainable development—from

the adoption of wind power to phasing out use of lead and mercury, to efforts to radically reduce waste in our cities—are being advanced by businesses, governments, and citizen activists everywhere. While hardly the norm in most countries, sustainable development nevertheless is becoming competitive as a vision for progress this century.

The World's Religions: Adding Value

But sustainable development arguably needs help. With each passing year, it becomes less and less likely that enlightened policies and greener technologies alone will be enough to build sustainable societies, as relentless and resource-intensive economic growth widens the gap between our impact on the planet and the impact it can endure.

Framing the loss of forests and species not just as an environmental concern, but as a moral one, and describing gross inequality in a world of unprecedented wealth as a values issue, are powerful arguments that can supplement the new technologies and policies promoted by environmentalists and others interested in creating a sustainable brand of progress. As theologian Jay McDaniel has written regarding sustainability, we need “a transformation of mind and heart, desire and intention. . . . We need a sense of mystery and humility, gratitude and celebration. We need what some might call healthy religious wisdom.”¹¹

Indeed, the world's religions have many assets to lend to the effort to build sustainable progress, including moral authority, a long tradition of ethical teachings, and the sheer political power that comes from having so many adherents. In an era of extensive individualism, the community-centered concern of many religious traditions is especially valuable. Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson has noted that “organized religion is more concerned with the welfare of the group and with the collective good than any other institution” in most societies today.¹² Philosopher Max Oelschlaeger agrees that in western societies in particular, where individualism is highly valued, “Religious discourse. . . is perhaps the most promising way to expand our cultural conversation to include non-market values such as sustainability.”¹³ The ethical perspective of religion could help create the fresh outlook that Einstein regarded as necessary to deal with intractable problems.

Maybe also
it will tie us back
to what was true
all along

But encouraging greater religious involvement in any societal project, especially one as broad-based as re-imagining progress, is a hard sell these days. With religious extremists making headlines around the globe, it's easy to wonder if religions are more a source of division and conflict than of peace and progress. Moreover, religious people and institutions, for the most part, have been slow to view the sustainability challenge as a religious concern. And some people argue that religions are too often part of mainstream thought and are unwilling to play the prophetic role that is a traditional religious strength. Religious writer and former monk Thomas Moore, for example, observes that religions often operate without challenging the dominant narratives of our time, including the narrative of progress.¹⁴

Such critiques are sobering. But it is also true that religious traditions are Phoenix-like, rising with renewed influence just when they are judged irrelevant, and often at times of societal desperation. Who would have imagined 15 years ago, for example, that evangelical Christians would be taking leadership positions on climate change, even pressing a president to change his position? Their renewed power and confidence comes from a reading of scripture through the lenses of a dying planet and a suffering human family. This process of reclaiming and reconstructing religious traditions, writes professor of religion Mary Evelyn Tucker, is critical if humans are to enjoy a century of inspired progress.¹⁵ Today, with environmental and social crises emerging acutely across the globe, many congregations and religious leaders are re-discovering their own rich resources—from sacred writings to rituals and symbols—and tapping them to help address the plight of our planet and its people.

Grounded Idealism: The Approach of This Book

This book is an attempt to suggest some of the ingredients for a new understanding of progress. It operates at the level of principle, rather than nuts-and-bolts economic policy. In this big-picture role, it says little that the world's wisdom traditions haven't said for hundreds and even thousands of years. Yet its call for a bounded progress may be fresh in a world accustomed to full-throttle economic growth and open-ended individualism. And its appeal to reli-

gions to contribute their unique gifts in reshaping progress is a fresh expression of confidence in buffeted institutions that may doubt their relevance in modern societies.

The book is organized into four parts, each with a different look at progress. Part One considers the record of the 20th century, with an emphasis on the huge but often overlooked problems created by the century's many advances. Part Two argues that a new understanding of progress means rooting all economic activity in a healthy environment—which is, after all, the foundation for everything we do. Part Three proposes a new economic understanding of progress that stresses well-being, not just wealth, as an important goal of progress. And Part Four emphasizes the important role that ethics can play in advancing our understanding of progress. Each Part opens with an essay chapter discussing vision or worldview. The power of the modern worldview is considered in Part One, and elements of an alternative worldview are examined in Parts Two, Three, and Four.

The thoughts presented in this book, especially in the vision chapters that open the four Parts, are idealistic. But they are also realistic, and even timely, for several reasons. First, the global community may be more receptive than ever to the need for a new, sustainable kind of development. As deforestation, species loss, greenhouse gas emissions, and overuse of water continue apace, critical environmental thresholds are being crossed, and scientists from many disciplines tell us that major crises now loom before the human family. Meanwhile, the single-minded focus on wealth production is producing increasingly debilitating side-effects, such as obesity, that may cause people to question the current development track. Growing awareness of major global concerns may mean that human readiness to accept major changes in societal course is likely also growing.

Second, the book is realistic because most of the ideas presented here are already being implemented on at least a pilot basis. As a colleague at Worldwatch wryly noted in writing about the viability of renewable energy, "it is difficult to claim that something is impossible once it has already occurred."¹⁶ Religious people and institutions worldwide are already spearheading pieces of a new vision of progress. While typically not part of mainstream religious agendas, these ini-

tiatives are gaining the support of religious leadership, and many are spreading quickly at the grassroots level. Given that the vast majority of the world's people subscribe to a religious tradition, the potential for these creative ideas to disseminate widely is huge.

Perhaps most importantly, this "idealistic" book is realistic because people, especially religious people, are often driven by vision. The visions vary, of course, but part of being a person of faith is having an idealism oriented toward creating a better world. Religious idealism has fueled societal change before. It helped gain independence for India from the world's foremost colonial power, and provided much of the driving energy in the U.S. civil rights movement and the movement to abolish apartheid in South Africa, to name just a few examples. Religion could play a transformative role once again this century, as part of the global struggle to give birth to a new and sustainable understanding of progress.

"Fundamental progress," wrote the great British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, "has to do with the reinterpretation of basic ideas." The challenge today is to reinterpret progress itself, and to gear it toward service of people and societies within boundaries established by nature. Reframed this way, progress is likely to mean new advances in human well-being that build on or reshape the technological progress of the last century. The world's religious traditions, with their vast experience in the values that build lasting progress, can be invaluable teachers and allies in this effort.

The
goal