

"Sustainable History and the Dignity of Man" by Nayef R. F. Al-Rodhan

Review

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The current human condition appears anything but promising. The problems of climate change, resource depletion, plant and animal extinction and environmental pollution and degradation are increasing rather than decreasing. The international financial crisis, itself merely an acute manifestation of a questionable growth model, threatens the solvency and internal stability of whole nations up to and including the USA. Widespread poverty means, that „for the first time in history more than one billion people go to bed hungry each night“, according to a recent statement by World Bank president, Robert Zoellick.

The international arena, already strained by NATO's „global war on terror“, which a large portion of the world's more than one billion Muslims regard as an assault on their religion and culture, is wracked by tensions and the threat of a Third World War, for which the dispute over Iran's atomic program or the increasing competition between China and Japan to exploit suspected oil and gas deposits in the East China Sea could provide the spark. Not for nothing did Michael Meacher, as the then British Minister for the Environment, warn in 2003, that the human race was in danger of „generating its own demise“ after „a mere quarter of a million years“ as compared to the dinosaurs, who – despite supposedly having pea-sized brains - „dominated the planet for 160 million years“.

Luckily for Homo sapiens, all, it would appear, is not lost. In „Sustainable History and the Dignity of Man“ Dr. Nayef R. F. Al-Rodhan extrapolates from a neurochemical model of human behaviour the means, by which the modern society could be best organised at an international and intercultural level, thereby leading to „global harmony“ (p. 444) no less. According to Al-Rodhan „good governance“ along with respect for individual „human dignity“ and cultural differences could guide the human race to „sustainable history“ and „quality of life“ on this „or other planets“ (p. 13). If that sounds somewhat presumptuous, then because, at least in the opinion of this reviewer, it is.

The overly ambitious nature of the author's blueprint for human survival can perhaps be partly attributed to his academic background.

Al-Rodhan is a graduate and at present Senior Member of St. Anthony's College at Oxford University, whose alumni include Richard Haass, former adviser to US Presidents George Bush sn. And jr. And current President of the enormously influential Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) in New York, the three-time Pulitzer prize winner and New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman and the British historian and Guardian columnist Timothy Garton Ash. St. Anthony's has a reputation as a cadre training centre for budding globalists. The writings of Al-Rodhan – along with those of his more illustrious peers – more than confirm the correctness of this judgement.

There is much in „Sustainable History and the Dignity of Man“ worth commending. Al-Rodhan's exposition of the philosophy of history through the ages and the different theories of knowledge is both comprehensive and easy for the reader to follow. His defence of humanistic values, his acknowledgement of the contribution of Islamic culture to Christian European thought and his denial of the singular suitability of the Western model for societal development in other parts of the world are convincing and challenge those proponents of militaristic force, who see humanity at the beginning of the 21st century engulfed in a „clash of civilisations“.

The leap, however, from analysing the historical conceptions of humanity and its relationship to the rest of the cosmos to laying out a program, by which our current difficulties might be overcome – and that permanently – smacks of hubris, to say the least. The little box diagrams such as „The Global Education Octagon“ (p. 404), with which practically each chapter ends, the excessive recourse to neologisms e.g. „neo-statecraft“ and „symbiotic realism“, leave the reader with the impression, that Al-Rodhan actually believes, that he, having plucked apart all conventional approaches in the areas of philosophy, psychology and geopolitics and in putting them back together in his own individual way, has found the key to conflict-free existence on earth.

Al-Rodhan's impressive analytic abilities are unfortunately overshadowed by his prescriptive tendencies. The desire to present solutions and the unquestioning adoption of the post-9/11 „security“ discourse - „bio-terrorism“, „cyber threats“ etc. - are unsurprising, when one considers Al-Rodhan's professional position as Senior Scholar in Geo-strategy and Director of the Geopolitics of Globalisation and Trans-national Security Programme at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), which describes itself as „an international foundation, created under the framework of Swiss participation in the Partnership for Peace“ and whose Advisory Board includes the likes of General (ret.) Klaus Naumann, former Chief of Staff of the German Armed Forces and an unapologetic proponent of NATO's nuclear first-strike strategy.

Seen in this light, Al-Rodhan's repeated dismissal of the nation-state as incapable of overcoming present and future challenges, and his recurring calls for a world government as the only means of providing dignity to each and every individual take on a self-serving tinge.

The suggestion, that global institutions would be better able to fulfil the goal of the Universal Declaration of the Human Rights of 1948 than the concert of nations, is a mere assumption and a weak one at that. Contrary to Al-Rodhan's expectations in this regard, most evidence, including the privileged position of the various business lobby groups at the multinational level – see the destructive effects of the American company Monsanto's efforts to partially dominate agricultural production in India – would suggest, that accountability decreases rather increases, the further the decision-making institutions are hierarchically, culturally, geographically etc.

removed from the people, whose lives they affect. The shortcomings of the globalisation paradigm, as elucidated for example in E. F.

Schumacher's 1973 best-selling work „Small is Beautiful“, are not addressed adequately by Al-Rodhan, but rather papered over by recourse to such woolly concepts as „civilisational triumph“.

An adequate attempt to come to terms with the gravity of the current situation of the human race on this planet would involve asking far-reaching questions with regard to the political-economic underpinnings of the existing system, as opposed to proposing, that the only corrective necessary is a reconfiguration of available philosophical concepts and political-cultural traditions.

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