

Sustainable History and the Dignity of Man

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One of the primary errors that potential readers of *Sustainable History and the Dignity of Man* could make is to take for granted that here is a book that, due to the immensity and complexity of its subject matter, would be a worthy read that concerned citizens might get around to perusing one day. This is too bad, because as it turns out, the principal reason to open the book is that it is a book that travels to unexplored crossroads with many fresh “big ideas” that will certainly resonate for weeks and months after you have put it down. Keep in mind, and as exemplified in the book, all ideas have a life cycle. They are conceived, live, and die, and new ideas replace them.

Its author, Dr. Nayef R.F. Al-Rodhan, is not only a prolific writer, he is also a Philosopher, Neuroscientist and Geostrategist who has provided his readers with a blueprint or strategy as to how *sustainable history* can be propelled by good governance. And if you are wondering, as I was, what is meant by “sustainable history,” Dr. Al-Rodhan defines it as: “a durable progressive trajectory in which the quality of life on this planet or other planets is premised on the guarantee of human dignity for all times and under all circumstances.” Basically, according to the author, the sustainability of history is dependent on the attainment of good governance paradigms limiting the excesses of human nature and ensuring a climate of happiness and productivity by the promotion of reason and dignity.

At the onset, Dr. Al-Rodhan points out that the objective of his book is the establishment of a new philosophy concerning sustainable history. He maintains that: “If we view civilisation as a single collective civilisation, comprised of a number of different geo-cultural domains, we need to develop a philosophy of history that considers human time as a means of understanding human nature and associated needs. At the individual level, the exercise of reason, as opposed to the acceptance of dogma, is more likely to lead to a dignified life.” With this in mind, we are able to decipher the kinds of institutions and arrangements required to ensure us of a sustainable history. Consequently, there would be no end but rather a coexistence of different geo-cultural domains which share a minimum number of basic values yet still retain their individuality. And dignity is above all central to sustainability of history.

Drawing upon his vast knowledge in the field of neuroscience, Dr. Al-Rodhan presents his philosophical theories concerning human nature and explores its ramifications vis-à-vis politics, national and global security, inter-state relations, and the future of man. The nucleus of the book comprises sixteen chapters divided into three parts, and to say its all encompassing ideas are quite bold, would be an understatement. It is a challenging read but one worthwhile.

The first part occupies itself with the foundations of life, which is broken down into the following topics: where are we, who are we, why are we here and what to we know for certain. The second part, Civilisational Triumph and Sustainable History deals with how can we collectively succeed, how can we attain dignity, how can justice be attained, what is needed for good national governance, what do we need for good global governance, how can we achieve sustainable security, how should international relations be approached, how should statecraft be conducted, and how should cultures interrelate. The last part deals with the history and the future of human and trans-human civilisation, where are we going and a concluding chapter that sums up the author's main principles.

Most chapters are summarized at the end and there is also an extensive glossary listing the terminology that the author uses throughout his writing including references to the chapters where they are to be found and elaborated upon. To simplify explanations there are several well-placed diagrams and summary tables that compliment the text, as do the extensive notes and index. An excellent table is the comparative view of philosophies of history where Dr. Al-Rodhan succinctly summarizes eight approaches terminating in his own.

Within these chapters Dr. Al-Rodhan details an array of compelling arguments and novel insights that are supported by a great deal of empirical evidence. For example, his theory of the meaning of existence is based upon the argument that what makes are existence meaningful is something that is highly subjective and in the end is determined by *sustainable neurochemical gratification*. (*Sustainable neurochemical gratification* is defined as something that is *linked to behaviour that is not detrimental to one's own existence or the existence of others. This notion forms the basis of the Theory of Sustainable Neurochemical Gratification that argues what makes our existence meaningful is highly individualistic and ultimately based on durable neurochemically mediated gratification*). Most of us would tend to agree that the brain leaves us with little or no control when we are swept up by our emotions and most of our behavior is primarily ruled by our emotional self-interests that focus initially on survival and, as pointed out, once achieved, domination. It is essential to increase the awareness of our emotions, which result in making relationships healthier and ultimately lead to sustainable history. Another, which takes into account the rapidity of scientific advances is that “strict ethical guidelines need to be developed in anticipation of significant technological and biotechnological advances to guarantee human dignity.”

In the end it all boils down to the need to change our ways and perceptions, where we permit the emergence of a new consciousness, if we are to sustain history. *Sustainable History and the Dignity of Man* certainly provides us with a persuasive map and is an overdue and worthy contribution to the literature of the sustainability of history. And if you agree or disagree with Dr. Al-Rodhan, you will still have to admit that his ideas will be valued as not only an important resource but also for those who relish dipping into a book that makes you think.

Dr. Al-Rodhan's passion for the subject is evident in his vast amount of knowledge and extensive writings. His credentials are impeccable which include Senior Member of St. Antony's College at Oxford University, Oxford, United Kingdom and Senior Scholar in Geostrategy and Director of the Programme on the Geopolitical Implications of Globalisation and Transnational Security at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Geneva, Switzerland. He holds an M.D. and a Ph.D, and he trained in neurosurgery/neuroscience research at the Mayo Clinic, Yale University and Harvard University. In addition, he is the founder of the neurotechnology programme, headed translational research and founded the laboratory for cellular neurosurgery and neurosurgical technology at MGH, Harvard. He was on the faculty of the Harvard Medical School, has published extensively on neuroscience research and won several research prizes. These Prizes include: The Sir James Spence Prize; The Gibb Prize; The Farquhar-Murray Prize; The American Association of Neurological Surgeon Poster Prize (twice); The Meninger Prize; The Annual Resident Prize of the Congress of Neurological Surgeons; The Young Investigator Prize of the American Association of Neurological Surgeons; The Annual Fellowship Prize of the Congress of Neurological Surgeons.