

## GREEN CONSUMPTION: SEARCHING FOR RELIGIOUS ETHICS OF CONSUMPTION

**Mohammad Hasan Basri**  
*The Asroruna Institute, Jakarta*

### Abstract

*Di tengah persoalan krisis lingkungan dan ekologis, muncul masalah baru yang telah menjadi gaya hidup masyarakat modern yaitu apa yang disebut sebagai “affluenza” atau gaya hidup konsumtif yang tidak lagi mempertimbangkan asas kegunaan dan pertimbangan ekologis dalam mengkonsumsi makanan, pakaian, tempat tinggal maupun kebutuhan sehari-hari lainnya. Salah satu cara untuk mengatasi kecenderungan gaya hidup konsumtif ini adalah dengan etika konsumsi untuk memperkuat integritas individual dan masyarakat agar bisa menjalankan hidup yang lebih sederhana, tidak boros, dan lebih ramah lingkungan. Bertolak dari tesis bahwa “agama masa depan akan lebih hijau” yang dicetuskan oleh Bron Taylor (2004), tulisan ini menelusuri jejak pemikiran “green paradigm” dan menawarkan konsep “green consumption” sebagai sebuah landasan bersama (common ground) bagi agama-agama untuk mengatasi masalah “affluenza” dalam kehidupan masyarakat modern yang terus cenderung konsumtif. Makalah ini juga menyuguhkan beberapa model etika terapan yang bisa dijadikan contoh untuk menformulasikan dan mengaplikasikan konsep “green consumption”.*

**Key words:** *green paradigm, green religion, green consumption, religious ethics, and consumerism.*

### INTRODUCTION

To begin with this discussion, I want to share my experience when I took a course on “Interrogating Globalization” during one semester-student exchange program in Department of Religion, Temple University Philadelphia, USA. The first meeting of the course was started with “food crisis” discussion which was the beginning of crisis in USA at that time (in the middle of 2008) by watching the provocative internet film entitled “the Story of Stuff”.<sup>1</sup> A part

---

<sup>1</sup> The film has been viewed over 10 million times by people around the world. The reflection and comments to this film was then written by Annie Leonard in the book with the same title. Leonard tracks the life of the Stuff we use every day—where our cotton T-shirts, laptop computers, and aluminum cans come from, how they are produced, distributed, and consumed, and where they go when we throw them out. See further, Annie Leonard, 2010. *The Story of Stuff: How Our Obsession with Stuff is Trashing the Planet, Our Communities, and our Health—and a Vision for Change*, New York: Free Press, p.145.

of the scenes revealed that *with just 5 percent of the world's population, we're consuming 30 percent of the world's resources and creating 30 percent of the world's waste. If everyone consumed at U.S. rates, we would need three to five planets!* How greedy we are! How much stuff we have consumed while many people living in scarcity of food! That was probably reflective insight that struck students' mind.

"We have a problem with stuff" indeed, as concluded by Annie Leonard (2010) in the film and her book. In terms of Daniel C. Maguire, modern world today faces a problem of "affluenza" (overconsumption) along with environmental crises and demographic crises.<sup>2</sup> Why does "affluenza" menacingly threaten our home-earth? Overconsumption decreases the carrying capacity of earth and practically empties the resources and gradually lowers down the level of environment and ecological health. The World Watch Institute reported that the ecological capacity of the world hitherto is not enough for excessive wishes of China, India, Japan and America.

For example, America has less than 5% of world population, but produces 25% of world CO<sub>2</sub> and use 25% of the world resources. In spite of having 3% of world discovered oil resources, America spends 26% of the world energy and produces 30% of the world spoils and wastes. According to researches, the effects of this country on environment are 250 times more than people of African Sahara. If China and India reach the American level in 2030, they will need the whole planet to satisfy their needs.

In addition, the difference of consumption patterns can be seen also between the North and the South. It brings about the inequalities, on which UNDP noted that 20% of the world's people in the highest income countries account for 86% of total private consumption expenditures, whereas the poorest 20% only account for 1.3%.<sup>3</sup>

To deal with "affluenza", Gary Gardner cherishes the hope that religious groups could envision and take account on the problem, for religions have a strong interest in restraining consumption, although some reasons probably very different from the concerns of environmentalists. Religious traditions broaden the discussion by citing the corrosive effect of excessive consumption not only on the environment, but on the development of character, both individuals

---

<sup>2</sup> The term "affluenza" is rooted from affluence and influenza used by critics of overconsumption and consumerism. See Maguire, Daniel C. 2000. *The Introduction of Visions of a New Earth: Religious Perspectives on Population, Consumption, and Ecology*. New York: State University of New York Press, p.2.

<sup>3</sup> To trace the data, see Bijan Bidabad, 2010. *Overconsumption in Ethic Economics and Sustainable Development*, New Delhi: the Institute for Trade Studies and Researches, p.7.

and of societies.

Religions are in a position to weight in more strongly with the spiritual and moral case against excessive consumption. And beyond preaching, they could become more active in the community by sponsoring neighborhood groups that seek to promote simplicity and by otherwise offering support to those who seek to live simply.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, this paper attempts to conceptualize “green consumption” as a common ground of religious ethics for religious community to contribute the problem of overconsumption in this age of consumerism. The following discussion will trace the historical roots on green paradigm, the definition of green consumption, and religious tenets as visionary bases for religious ethics of consumption.

### THE GENEALOGY OF GREEN PARADIGM

In the middle of the 1990s there was a short period when the environmentalist movements succeeded in popularizing the idea of environmental space, combining the idea of consideration for future generations with the idea of a more equal distribution within the present generation, this idea also surfaced in some official publications. The idea of environmental space placed consumption and lifestyle on the agenda in a much more radical way than the dominant interpretation of sustainable consumption and production tended to do.

According to Nick Robins, the emphasis of sustainable production is on the supply side of the equation, focusing on improving environmental performance in key economic sectors, such as agriculture, energy, industry, tourism and transport. Sustainable consumption addresses the demand side, looking at how the goods and services required to meet basic needs and improve quality of life - such as food and health, shelter, clothing, leisure and mobility - can be delivered in ways that reduce the burden on the Earth's carrying capacity.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, the increasing political and administrative interest in sustainable consumption co-existed with a boom in global consumption during the 1990s, both in the North and in parts of the South. Simultaneously, inequalities increased in many countries, widening the gulf between extravagant consumption and poor conditions at different levels.

---

<sup>4</sup> Gary Gardner, 2002. *Invoking the Spirit: Religion and Spirituality in the Quest for a Sustainable World*, Danvers: World watch Institute, p.49.

<sup>5</sup> Nick Robins and Sarah Roberts, *Changing Consumption and Production Patterns: Unlocking Trade Opportunities*. International Institute for Environment and Development and UN Department of Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development, 1997

To respond to this situation, the political interest in the consumption-environment nexus then increased which was followed and supported by work programs in different international organizations and national administrations. In 1995, the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development adopted an International Work Program on Changing Consumption and Production Patterns. From this decade on, there are many similar programs have been emerging in the more massive and global way.

In the terms of Jonathan Porritt<sup>6</sup>, a former leading member of the UK Green Party, this shifting political view called “green paradigm”; from the politics of industrialism to the politics of ecology. To distinguish this changing vision of development in the more sustainable way, he provides the features of “green paradigm as shown in the following table:

<i>The politics of industrialism</i>	<i>The politics of ecology</i>
A deterministic view of the future An ethos of aggressive individualism Materialism, pure and simple Divisive, reductionist analysis Anthropocentrism Rationality and packaged knowledge Outer-directed motivation Patriarchal values Institutionalized violence  Economic growth and GNP Production for exchange and profit High income differentials A ‘free-market’ economy Ever-expanding world trade Demand stimulation Employment as a means to an end Capital-intensive production Unquestioning acceptance of the technological fix  Centralization, economies of scale Hierarchical structure Dependence upon experts Representative democracy Emphasis on law and order Sovereignty of nation state	Flexibility and an emphasis on personal autonomy A co-operatively based, communitarian society A move towards spiritual, non-material values Holistic synthesis and integration Biocentrism Intuition and understanding Inner-directed motivation and personal growth Post-patriarchal, feminist values Non-violence  Sustainability and quality of life Production for use Low income differentials Local production for local need Self-reliance Voluntary simplicity Work as an end in itself Labor-intensive production Discriminating use and development of science and Technology  Decentralization, human scale Non-hierarchical structure Participative involvement Direct democracy Libertarianism

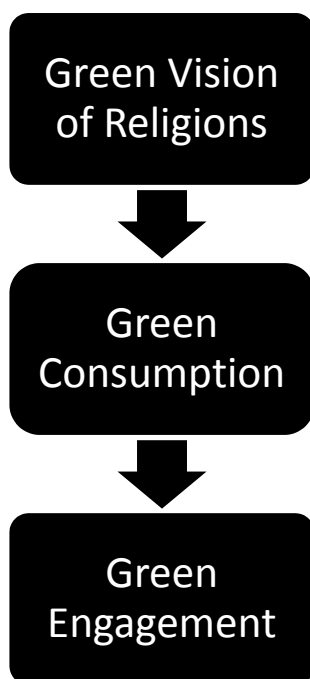
<sup>6</sup> This concept is reviewed in historically by Derek Wall in his comprehensive review on environmental literatures, see further, *Green history: A reader in environmental literature, philosophy and Politics*, New York: Routledge, 1994, p.9.

Domination over nature Environmentalism Environment managed as a resource Nuclear power High energy, high consumption	Internationalism and global solidarity Harmony with nature Ecology Resources regarded as strictly finite Renewable sources of energy Low energy, low consumption
---	---

The idea of green paradigm to shift from the politics of industrialism to the politics of ecology has been recognized, adapted, and practiced in the global society. Derek Wall affirms that “green sensibilities are multiethnic and multi-cultural, with a wide appeal”. It promises a more sustainable development and a better quality of life. Philosophically, it also inspires people from all aspects of life to rethink and to reevaluate the existing way of life, including religious society. The modern development that tends to degrade nature triggers religious groups to envision the era of environmental crises.

Bron Taylor indicated to religious community that it may be the only possible way to the future for religion to be greener.<sup>7</sup> Scholars see great potential for developing environmental ethics based on religious traditions. Every religion has environmental credentials depend on whether its teaching, its practice, or its potential for “greening” itself.

### CONSTRUCTING RELIGIOUS ETHICS OF CONSUMPTION



Regarding to the aim of this paper to find a common ground for religions in conceptualizing religious ethics of consumption, I would like to propose “green consumption as the concept. It can be described in the following schema:

The schema above shows that the concept of “green consumption” could be rooted in the religious teachings, rituals, and traditions to envision how to overcome the problem of overconsumption.

There are some notions that can be found in world religions as green vision,<sup>8</sup> for example in Judaism: *why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?* (Isaiah 55: 2); in Christianity: *how does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?* (1

<sup>7</sup> Bron Taylor, 2004. “A Green Future for Religion?” in *Futures* 36: 991-1008, p.1005.

<sup>8</sup> Gary Gardner, op.cit. p.13.

John 3:17); in Islam: *eat and drink, but waste not by excess; verily He loves not the excessive* (Qur'an 7:31); in Taoism: *He who knows he has enough is rich* (Tao Te Ching, Chapter 33); in Hinduism: *on gaining the desired object, one should not feel elated. On not receiving the desired object, one should not feel dejected. In case of obtaining anything in excess, one should not hoard it. One should abstain from acquisitiveness* (Acarangasutra: 2:114:19); in Confucianism: *Excess and deficiency are equally at fault* (Confucius, XI.15); and in Buddhism: *The deep sense of calm that nature provides...protects our heart and mind. The lesson nature teaches us lead to a new birth beyond suffering caused by our acquisitive self-preoccupation* (Buddhadasa Bhikku).

To actualize "green consumption" as applied ethics, religious groups may cooperate with governments, social organizations, NGOs, and other stakeholders as a form of "green engagement".<sup>9</sup> Thus, by "green consumption", not just of enabling people to change their consumption practices based on their religious values but also of facilitating more widespread public participation to provide sustainable consumption and products. Although it is not easy for religious community to create the concrete initiatives to promote simple living especially in a high-consumption culture like in the United State and Europe, there has been a number of enlightening religious leaders and religious community that initiate to curb the culture of consumption.

Just to mention some inspiring experiences, the following examples are three models of "green engagement" to promote and to implement "green consumption" initiated by religious leaders and local community. The first model is instigated by religious leaders and public figure to promote ethical consumption and green life. What Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams has been doing is just an example. As the head of the Anglican Church, he promotes religious ethic of moderate consumption for the impressive experience of Pope John Paul II who set as strategic goal of his papacy to dampen the influence of consumerism in industrial cultures.

Another figure that recently succeeds in campaigning green politics and green economics is Prince Charles. He now has one of Britain's leading independent organic food brands. The Prince of Wales converted his farm at Highgrove to organic farming in 1986. It's now producing a range of organic food products called 'Duchy Originals'. Britain's biggest supermarket chain, Tesco, is now carrying products from the Duchy Originals range, largely traditional English food items, such as shortbread biscuits and marmalade. The profits from sales of Duchy Originals go to the Prince of Wales's Charitable Foundation. The

---

<sup>9</sup> Frans Coenen, 2002. *The Role of Stakeholders in Changing Consumption and Production Patterns*, Paris: OECD. p.13.



company has already risen well over £1.3 million for charity.<sup>10</sup>

The second model is village-based program that explicitly integrate material and spiritual development. This kind of model has been conducted by Sarovadaya Shramadan in Sri Lanka. The movement, whose name roughly means “awakening of all through sharing”, motivates villagers to undertake a broad range of development projects, from latrine building to establishment of preschool and cultural centers within a framework of Buddhist principles. It has a vision “Sarvodayan ethic of consumption” that teaches consumption as not an end unlike what is in the West where consumption is regarded as a prime engine of economic growth. Instead, Sarvodayans see consumption as a tool; it provides the material platform needed to support the spiritual work of arriving at enlightenment.<sup>11</sup>

The third model is conceptualizing green economics based on Islamic teaching. One of the successful Islamic leaders to initiate more sustainable development and promote moderate life is KH. Muhammad Achmad Sahal Mahfudz. Based on his famous concept of “social *fiqh*” (social concept of Islamic jurisprudence), he has been actively empowering peasant people in his surrounding society to live in a moderate way of life and run sustainable economic development.

One of the inspiring stories that can be learned is how KH. Sahal successfully develop *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) and innovatively empowering peasant people since he established microfinance in 1977. The surrounding neighbors of *pesantren* are usually planting cassava, *pesantren* then initiated to help them producing *kerupuk singkong* (cassava cracker) as household industry by providing micro credit without interest to support them in financial capital. Then they ran various green businesses especially agribusiness such as fruit and peanut. Today, most of the peanut production that is produced by Garuda Food (one of the biggest food company) has been supplied from this *pesantren*’s group of farmers.<sup>12</sup> These three models of green engagement can inspire today’s situation to strengthen green sensibility. It may be modified depending on situational and societal needs.

## CONCLUSION

The problem of “affluenza” or overconsumption has exacerbated the environmental and ecological crises. One of the promising solutions is

<sup>10</sup> Tanya Ha 2003, *Greeniology: How to live well, be green and make a difference*, NSW Australia: A Sue Hines Book Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd p.20

<sup>11</sup> Gary Gardner, op.cit. p.13.

<sup>12</sup> KH Muhammad Achmad Sahal Mahfudz, *Nuansa Fiqih Sosial*, 2004 (4<sup>th</sup> Edition) Yogyakarta: LKiS, p.249.

cherishing hope for religious groups to envision individual, group, and society and to be engaged in sustainable development. Every religion has ethical bases and particular capacity to generate social capital to advance the work of sustainability, including conceptualizing “green consumption” as the common ground for religious group to solve the problem of “affluenza”. I believe, as Bron Taylor also affirms in the beginning of this paper, that the future of religion will be greener if religious people could envision modern society to live environmentally friendlier.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Annie Leonard, 2010. *The Story of Stuff: How Our Obsession with Stuff is Trashing the Planet, Our Communities, and our Health—and a Vision for Change*, New York: Free Press, p.145.
- Bidabad, Bijan. 2010. *Overconsumption in Ethic Economics and Sustainable Development*, New Delhi: the Institute for Trade Studies and Researches.
- Coenen, Frans. 2002. *The Role of Stakeholders in Changing Consumption and Production Patterns*, Paris: OECD.
- Coward, Harold G. Daniel C. Maguire, 2000. *Visions of a New Earth: Religious Perspectives on Population, Consumption, and Ecology*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Gary Gardner, 2002. *Invoking the Spirit: Religion and Spirituality in the Quest for a Sustainable World*, Danvers: Worldwatch Institute.
- Ha, Tanya. 2003, *Greeniology: How to live well, be green and make a difference*, NSW Australia: A Sue Hines Book Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd.
- Maguire, Daniel C. 2000. The Introduction of *Visions of a New Earth: Religious Perspectives on Population, Consumption, and Ecology*. New York: State University of New York Press, p.2.
- Mahfudz, KH Muhammad Achmad Sahal, *Nuansa Fiqih Sosial*, 2004 (4<sup>th</sup> Edition) Yogyakarta: LKiS.
- Robins, Nick and Sarah Roberts, 1997. *Changing Consumption and Production Patterns: Unlocking Trade Opportunities*. International Institute for Environment and Development and UN Department of Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development.
- Taylor, Bron. 2004. “A Green Future for Religion?” in *Futures* 36: 991-1008.
- Wall, Derek, 1994, *Green history: A reader in environmental literature, philosophy and Politics*, New York: Routledge.