

Interreligious Insight

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A Global Ethic: Development and Goals

Hans Kung

Would it really make any difference to the universe if the human race destroyed itself? Our globe is a very insignificant object on the periphery of one of a hundred million galaxies. Just as the human race came into being, so it can pass away again. And our generation is the first in the long history of this globe that has proven technically able to destroy itself, by nuclear weapons or by eroding the ecological basis of its survival. According to scientists the universe has existed for at least 15 billion years. There has been human life on our planet for perhaps 2,000,000 years. So 99.9 % of human history has been primal history: a history without writing, without the name of a people or a religion, a political or a religious leader. But since the Stone Age, the species 'homo sapiens', as present-day human beings proudly call themselves, has been viewed as distinct from the animal world by virtue of its self-consciousness. Homo sapiens used tools and weapons, controlled fire, buried the dead, offered sacrifices, and was able – inspired by magic or religion – to produce cave paintings, carvings and statues.

Only about 5,000 years ago, at the beginning of the third millennium BCE, early historical high cultures and high religions developed in Mesopotamia, the Nile valley, the Indus valley and the Huangho valley in China. That brought 'prehistory' to an end and written 'history' into being, able to speak to us in a living way through its literary documents. At this point, the real 'historical' period of the human race began, as increasing numbers of specific peoples, religions, and historical persons emerged into history. Now, not only information about administration and trade, but later also myths and sagas, customs, laws and morals were recorded. From a historical perspective the concrete ethical norms, values, insights and key concepts of religions and philosophies came together in a highly complicated social and dynamic process. Where basic human needs and concerns emerged, from the beginning of human history there has been pressure to develop regulations for human conduct: priorities, conventions, customs, commandments, instructions and laws, in short, particular ethical norms. Much that is proclaimed in the Bible as God's commandment is already found in the ancient Babylonian Code of Hammurabi from the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries BCE. Human beings must continually test ethical norms and solutions in projections and models, often proving their worth over generations. Eventually, such norms finally come to be recognized by a group, tribe, people or nation, but occasionally – if the times have changed completely – they are also diluted and replaced. Are we perhaps living in such a time of change? Given the reality of our modern technological society, which is so many-layered, changeable, complex and often impenetrable, it is vital that we employ scientific

methods in order to investigate the material laws and future possibilities of society. Of course, not every person need make use of scientific methods. Even today the pre-scientific awareness of ethical norms remains important for a significant proportion of people. Happily, many still 'spontaneously' act correctly in particular situations – on the basis of pre-scientific awareness of particular ethical norms – without ever having read a treatise on moral philosophy or moral theology. Nevertheless, the wrong verdicts (for example in connection with war, racism, the situation of women or the significance of birth control) that have found their way into many religions in the course of more recent history have shown that modern life has become too complex for defining specific ethical norms – particularly with regard to sexuality or aggression, economic or political power – in a naive blindness to reality, overlooking empirical data and insights confirmed by science.

In positive terms, this means that a modern ethic depends on contact with the sciences: psychology and psychotherapy, sociology and social science, behavioural research, biology, cultural history and philosophical anthropology. The religions, their responsible leaders and teachers, should not hesitate to engage all these: the human sciences in particular offer them a growing wealth of relatively certain anthropological insights and information relevant to action, and each of the disciplines can contribute to the facilitation of appropriate and justifiable decisions. A Coalition of Believers and Non-believers for a Common Ethic

Over the millennia the religions were the systems of orientation that laid the foundation for a particular morality, legitimated and motivated it, and often also sanctioned punishments. But need that be the case now, in largely secularized society? The religions have contributed a great deal to the spiritual and moral progress of human society; it is also clear, however, that non-religious people can have a basic ethical orientation and lead a moral life. Indeed in history non-religious people have often pioneered a new sense of human dignity and done more for human emancipation, freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and other human rights than their religious counterparts. Non-religious people have developed and pursued goals and priorities, values and norms, ideals and models, as well as criteria for distinguishing good and evil. In our own time many religious and secular people around the world are working together to develop a moral vision that takes its bearings from the human dignity of all men and women, and according to present understanding this human dignity includes reason and responsibility, freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and the other human rights which have been established over the course of a long history.

It is of the utmost significance for peace among the peoples of the world, for international collaboration in politics, economics and culture, and also for international organizations like the United Nations that both religious people and non-religious people can in their respective ways advocate and defend human dignity and human rights, can in short, embrace a humane ethic. In fact both believers and non-believers endorse the affirmation that stands as Article 1 in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, promulgated on 10 December 1948 – in the wake of the Second World War and the Holocaust:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

A coalition of believers and non-believers working in respectful mutuality is indispensable for a common global ethic. Non-believers can join believers in resisting all trivial nihilism, diffuse cynicism and social apathy and devote themselves with conviction to the following aim: that the basic right of all human beings (no matter their sex, nation, religion, race or class) to a life worth living is not largely ignored, as was formerly the rule, but is increasingly realized. This is not a sketch of utopia, but a realistic vision. A society without war has become a reality since 1945, at least in the OECD world, in which material imbalances are slowly reduced by strengthening democratic structures and institutions and by raising the standard of living of the poor.

Globalization Needs a Global Ethic

The modern phenomenon of globalization concerns not only internal and special issues of economy. It concerns universal social, highly political, and ultimately ethical issues. In concrete terms it posits the question of whether profit, and therefore the pursuit of profit that is justified in principle, should be the one and only purpose of an economic system, of a bank, or any enterprise. The experience of economic globalization makes clear the urgency of the question of what is ethical. The modern world also needs a globalization of ethics.

Globalization is therefore much more than just an economic reality. In order to lend sustainability to the globalization of markets, technology, and communication, economic activities must be conducted in ways that are society- and environment-friendly. The globalization of the economy, technology and the media also means the globalization of problems and challenges: from financial and labour markets to the environment, organized crime and terrorism. For this reason, reflection on global ethical standards is essential. In order to assure that economic performance remains subordinate to human and social goals, globalization demands a political foundation and an ethical framework as well. What is needed is not a uniform ethical system ('ethics' in the strict sense), but rather a necessary minimum of shared ethical values, basic attitudes and standards to which all regions, nations and interest groups can subscribe – in other words, a shared basic 'ethic' for humankind, an 'ethos', in the sense of a moral attitude. A global ethic is therefore not a new ideology or superstructure. It will not make the specific ethics of the different religions and philosophies superfluous. It is no substitute for the Torah, the Sermon on the Mount, the Qur'an, the Bhagavadgita, the Discourses of the Buddha or the Analects of Confucius. A global ethic is nothing but the necessary minimum of common values, standards and basic attitudes. In other words: a minimal basic consensus relating to binding values, irrevocable standards and moral attitudes, which can be affirmed by all religions despite their 'dogmatic' differences and can also be supported by non-believers. There is a need for the rediscovery and reassessment of ethics in politics and economics, a need for morality (in the positive sense), but not for moralism (morality in the negative sense). Moralism and moralizing overvalue morality and ask too much of it. Moralizers make morality the sole criterion for human action and ignore the relative independence of various spheres of life like economics, law and politics. The enunciation of a few basic

ethical standards does not demand a decision on every controversial issue on which an ethical consensus has not been reached in the present situation. On the other hand ethics also excludes a libertinism that claims rights without any responsibilities. The dignity of the human person is the basis of both rights and responsibilities. Article 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms the importance of 'duties' and of the 'just requirements of morality':

1. Everyone has duties to the community within which the free and full development of the personality is possible.
2. In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.

A Global Process of Growing Ethical Awareness

There are already several important international documents that explicitly speak of human rights and human responsibilities, which call programmatically for a global ethic and even attempt to identify specific areas of application:

1. The 1995 report by the UN Commission for Global Governance calls for an ethic of neighbourhood in all areas: "global values must be the core of a world political order."
2. The equally important report by the World Commission on Culture and Development, also 1995, calls in the very first chapter for 'a New Global Ethic', an ethic of humankind, a global ethic "to cope with the global problems mentioned."
3. This request also found support in the UNESCO Universal Ethics Project of 1997, the World Economic Forum at Davos in 1997 and the Indira Gandhi Conference at Delhi in 1997.

Such international conferences and commissions not only stress the need for a global ethic but also call for a clear formulation of human responsibilities. This was first done in 1993 by the Parliament of the World's Religions in its Toward a Global Ethic: an Initial Declaration, and later by the InterAction Council, made up of former heads of state and government, which in 1997 published a proposal for a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities. In 1999, the Third Parliament of the World's Religions meeting at Cape Town, South Africa, issued A Call to our Guiding Institutions. We shall discuss the Call document below. Let me first recall the main thrust of the 1993 Declaration Toward a Global Ethic.

Two Basic Ethical Principles of Humanity

It is not necessary to re-invent the ethical wheel. In the millennia-old cultural traditions of humanity we find very elementary ethical standards that are convincing and practicable today for all women and men of good will. Of course, cultural traditions differ from each other in their understanding of what is helpful and what is unhelpful for the human being, what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil. It is absolutely impossible either to gloss over or ignore the very serious differences among the civilizations.

However, these differences should not hinder the perception and appreciation of those ethical values and standards which are already held in common and which can jointly be affirmed, on religious or non-religious grounds. On the basis of all the scholarly work in this field done so far it is now possible to outline the content of a global ethic. Now as before, women and men are treated inhumanely all over the world. They are robbed of their opportunities and their freedom; their human rights are trampled underfoot; their dignity is disregarded. In the face of all inhumanity, ethical traditions demand strongly that every human being must be treated humanely. For example, 'humanity', 'humaneness' (Chinese: ren), in the sense of benevolence, is already a central ethical term in the Analects of Confucius and can be found in most cultures and religions.

There is a broad ethical consensus around the globe, that every human being without distinction of age, sex, race, skin color, physical or mental ability, language, religion, political view, or national or social origin possesses an inalienable and inviolable dignity. Everyone, the individual as well as the state, is therefore obliged to honor this dignity and protect it. Humans must always be the subjects of rights, must be ends, never mere means, never mere objects of commercialization and industrialization in economics, politics and media, in research institutes, and industrial corporations. No one stands 'above good and evil' – no human being, no social class, no influential interest group, no cartel, no police apparatus, no army, and no state. On the contrary, possessed of reason and conscience, every human is obliged to behave in a genuinely human fashion, to do good and avoid evil.

Another principle has persisted in many cultural traditions of humankind for thousands of years: What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others. This 'golden rule' is already attested by Confucius (c.551-489 BCE); it is also expressed in Judaism by Rabbi Hillel (60 BCE to 10 CE) and in Christianity (the Sermon on the Mount): "Whatever you want people to do for you, do also for them." Kant's categorical imperative could be understood as a modernization, rationalization and secularization of this 'golden rule': "Act in such a way that the maxims of your will at any time can be taken at the same time as the principle of a universal legislation," or "Act in such a way that you always use humankind, both in your person and in the person of anyone else..., at the same time as an end, never as a means." These two principles of humanity can serve as the irrevocable, unconditional norms for all areas of life, for families and communities, for races, nations, and religions. Racism, nationalism, sexism, or religious fanaticism prevent humans from being authentically human. Self-determination and self-realization are legitimate so long as they are not separated from human self-responsibility and global responsibility, that is, from responsibility for fellow humans and for the planet earth.

On this basis, four irrevocable directives can be discerned, four imperatives of humanity – extensively explored in the declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions, and presented in a more condensed and juridical form in the proposal of the InterAction Council:

1. "Have respect for all life!"

The ancient precept, especially urgent in a time of children killing children, "You shall not kill," evokes today the human responsibility for a culture of non-violence and respect for life.

2. "Deal honestly and fairly!"

The very old commandment, important more than ever in the age of globalization, "You shall not steal," speaks today to our responsibility for a culture of solidarity and a just economic order.

3. "Speak and act truthfully!"

The ancient axiom, incumbent also upon politicians and the media, "You shall not lie," today calls up our responsibility for a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness.

4. "Respect and love one another!"

The age-old directive, even more important in an age which seems to be without taboos, "You shall not abuse sexuality, shall not commit sexual immorality," today means the responsibility for a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women.

Recent Developments of the Global Ethic Project

During the first week of December 1999 the Third Parliament of the World's Religions, following those held in Chicago in 1893 and in 1993, convened at Cape Town, South Africa. One of the main tasks of the 1999 Parliament consisted in building upon the process of the past six years and further concretizing the Global Ethic Project. This was done on the basis of a new document, A Call to our Guiding Institutions, those institutions which play a decisive and influential role in society: religion and spirituality; government; agriculture, labour, industry, and commerce; education; arts and communications media; science and medicine; international intergovernmental organizations; and organizations of civil society. They are invited to adopt the principles and directives of the Global Ethic and to apply them to concrete issues. The rationale focuses on the notion of 'creative engagement':

When reflecting on the future of the human community, one must consider the world's most powerful institutions – institutions, whose policies, for better and for worse, influence every aspect of life on the planet. Clearly, the critical issues facing the world today present an acute ethical challenge to these institutions. What is urgently needed is a new opening to creative engagement among the guiding institutions – an active, attentive, and inventive collaboration, rooted in shared moral principles and expressed in mutually sustained programs on behalf of the peoples of the twenty-first century.

The Call document is directly based on the Chicago Declaration of 1993, related citations from which are printed at the margin of each section.

In addition, an increasing number of political and religious personalities have joined the calls for a global ethic. Some examples: Vaclav Havel, President of the Czech Republic, emphasized at the annual meeting of IMF and World Bank in Prague in 2000 that:

The crucial task is to fundamentally strengthen a system of universally shared moral standards that will make it impossible, on a truly global scale, for the various rules to be time and again circumvented with still more ingenuity than had gone into their invention. Such standards will truly guarantee the weight of the rules and will generate natural respect for them in the societal climate. Actions proven to jeopardize the future of the human race should not only be punishable but, first and foremost, should be generally regarded as a disgrace. This will hardly ever happen unless we all find, inside ourselves, the courage to substantially change and newly form an order of values that, with all our diversity, we can jointly embrace and jointly respect; and, unless we again relate these values to something that lies beyond the horizon of our immediate personal or group interest.

Important support for this vision was given by the new Director General of the IMF, Horst Kohler. He recalled the appeal by President Vaclav Havel "to reflect on the wider dimension of the task, to allow globalization to work for the prosperity of all, to seek new sources of a sense of responsibility for the world." And Dr. Kohler added: "I fully share this call for generally recognized moral standards. Indeed, as Hans Küng says, a global economy needs a global ethic."

The following statements reflect convergent sentiments from a variety of cultures:
Mary Robinson, High Commissioner for Human Rights:

What is clear is that for the first time ever the pursuit of a goal by humanity, the attempt to move in the direction of a minimal consensus of shared values, attitudes and moral standards, will require the same degree of commitment and equal contribution from women and men.

Prince Hassan Bin Talal of Jordan:

By providing a starting point that all can agree upon, a global ethic would begin to traverse the split between subject and object. It would identify the fundamentals that are common to all religious traditions, and distill from them the essence of human belief. A global ethic should constitute a core of belief, acceptable to all. It should not seek to impose one vision, or to legislate away our differences. It should strive for unity, but seek neither to eradicate nor to compromise diversity. After all, in this global age, only a truly global ethic can be of real value.

Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate:

The challenge we now face is for the different nations and peoples of the world to agree on a basic set of human values, which will serve as a unifying force in the development of a genuine global community.

The need for a global ethic is also confirmed by religious authorities. Pope John Paul II declared in his address to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences in Rome in 2001:

As humanity embarks upon the process of globalization, it can no longer do without a common code of ethics. This does not mean a single dominant socio-economic system or culture that would impose its values and its criteria on ethical reasoning. It is within the human being as such, within universal humanity sprung from the Creator's hand, that the norms of social life are to be sought. Such a search is indispensable if globalization is not to be just another name for the absolute relativization of values and the homogenization of life-styles and cultures. In all the variety of cultural forms, universal human values exist and they must be brought out and emphasized as the guiding force of all development and progress.

The Moderator of the World Council of Churches Central Committee, Aram I, Catholicos of Cilicia, underlined the global ethic idea in his Official Report to the 8th Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1998:

We are committed to the development of a basic common ethics that may lead societies from mere existence to meaningful co-existence, from confrontation to reconciliation, from degeneration of moral values to the restoration of the quality of life that restores the presence of transcendence in human life. Global culture must be sustained by a global ethics that will guide the relations of nations with each other and with the creation, and will help them to work together for genuine world community. Such a global ethic, the idea of which was launched by the Parliament of World Religions in 1993 should not reflect the Western Christian ethos; it must be based on a diversity of experiences and convictions. The church, together with other living faiths, should seek a global ethics based on shared ethical values that transcend religious beliefs and narrow definitions of national interests. Human rights must be undergirded by ethical principles. Therefore, dialogue among religions and cultures is crucial as the basis for greater solidarity for justice and peace, human rights and dignity.

Let me conclude by mentioning a very recent and particularly exciting development: bringing the Global Ethic to the United Nations level. The UN – taking up a proposal made by the President of Iran, Seyed Mohammad Khatami, to the UN General Assembly in 1998 – proclaimed the year 2001 the "International Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations." At the end of the year, a 20-person expert group of 'Eminent Persons' convened by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan presented a report to him and to the General Assembly. [Editor's note: for further information, consult the United Nations web site, www.un.org.]

I am privileged to be a member of this group, together with outstanding personalities such as Hanan Ashrawi, Jacques Delors, Nadine Gordimer, Prince Hassan of Jordan, Graca Machel, Amartya Sen, Dick Spring, and Richard von Weizsacker, to name only a few. The group met three times, in Vienna, Dublin and Qatar, and worked intensely on the draft. The main thrust of the report is to develop a new paradigm of international relations able to meet the new challenges our world is facing. The horrible events of the 11th of September manifested in a cruel way that political thought and action today has also to take economic, cultural and religious dimensions fully into account. Let me now

quote some sentences of the report that clearly show how strongly the contribution of a global ethic for a new paradigm of international relations is now perceived on the UN level:

It is reconciliation that may lead all of us, no matter how this reconciliation process is achieved, to discover and to establish a global ethic. A global ethic for institutions and civil society, for leaders and for followers, requires a longing and striving for peace, longing and striving for justice, longing and striving for partnerships, longing and striving for truth. These might be the four pillars of a system of a global ethic that reconciliation, as the new answer to the vicious circle of endless hatred, is going to provide us.

How is a global ethic to be established?

This is a question that can be addressed to all new ideas. As an example the concept of a global ethic resonates strongly with the demands set forth in the recent United Nations Global Compact; but what a long process of conscientization it has taken for these concerns for human rights, humane working conditions and environmental sustainability to reach the level of the UN. With all such issues, as in the cases of peace and disarmament and the partnership between men and women, a very complex and lengthy process of cultivating awareness has been required. Nothing less will be demanded if there is to be a change of awareness with respect to an ethic for humankind. Many people can assist in the effort: pioneer thinkers, activists and initiative groups, but equally the countless teachers, from kindergarten to secondary school, who are already committed to a new understanding of the world religions, universal peace and a global ethic. Reflection on the ethic that all men and women have in common is more necessary than ever for the peaceful coexistence of humankind, on the local level (in countless multicultural and multifaith cities) and on the global level (in terms of global communication, global economy, global ecology and global politics).

In order to meet the challenges of the future, humanity needs not only science but also wisdom; not only technology but also spiritual energy; not only economy but also humanity. Humankind must remain humane, must become even more humane; and this calls urgently for a global ethic embodying the ethical values and standards mentioned above:

- non-violence and respect for life
- justice and solidarity
- truthfulness and tolerance
- partnership, mutual respect and love.

Smartness and toughness are not enough. Professional and political competence is not enough. Ethical competence is also required, based on moral values and standards. This is an insight shared by all the great civilizations: In 500 BCE Confucius wrote, "If a man is not humane, what can he do with the rituals? If a man is not humane, what can he do with music?" Mahatma Gandhi said it all, perhaps, when he described the "seven social sins of humankind" (that can only be overcome on the basis of a global ethic):

1. politics without principles,
2. wealth without work,

3. enjoyment without conscience,
 4. knowledge without character,
 5. business without morality,
 6. science without humanity,
 7. religion without sacrifice.
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Professor Hans Küng is the Director of the Global Ethic Foundation, Tübingen, Germany. He was the author of the original Declaration Toward a Global Ethic adopted by the Assembly of Religious and Spiritual Leaders at the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions (Chicago). This article was first presented at the multi-religious conference, "A Global Ethic and Its Relevance for the United Kingdom," hosted by the University of Glasgow, UK, November 2001.