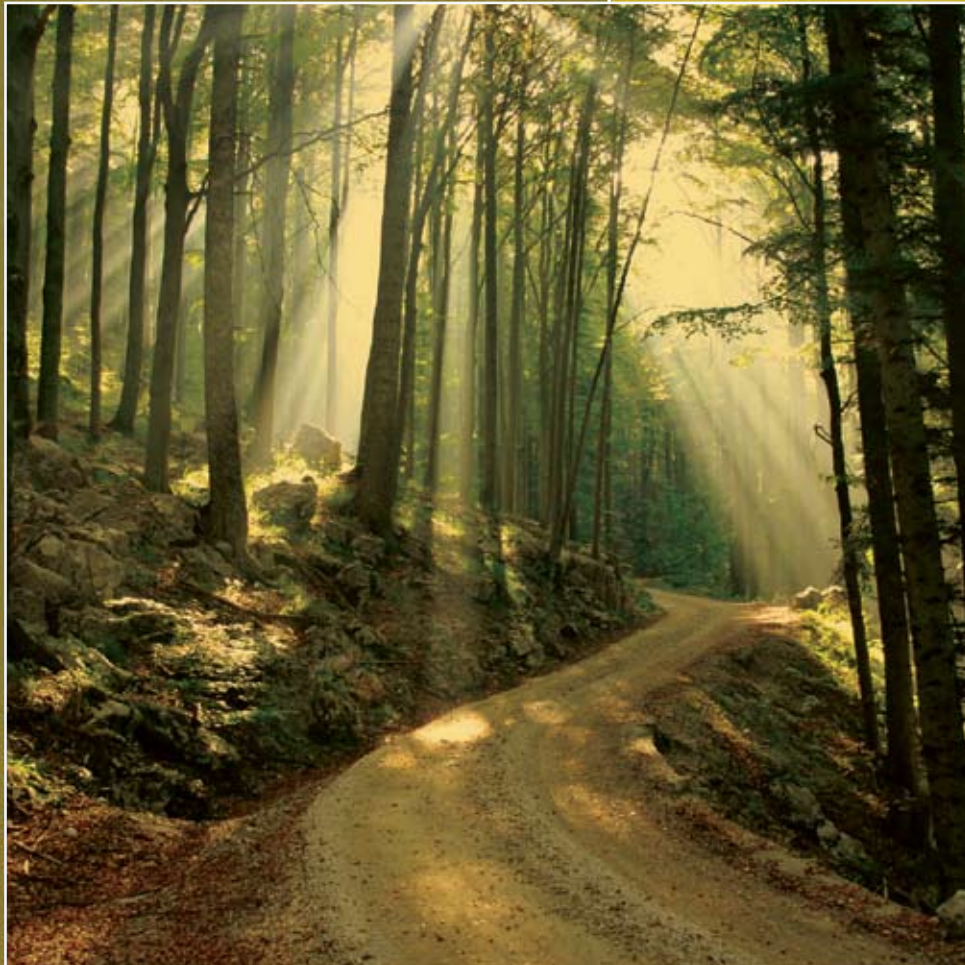


# A GLOBAL ETHIC: ITS SCOPE AND LIMITS

TAHA ABDERRAHMAN

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TABAH FOUNDATION  
Abu Dhabi, UAE  
Tel: +971-2-558-4588  
Fax: +971-2-558-8681

[www.tabahfoundation.org](http://www.tabahfoundation.org)

# DIRECTOR'S INTRODUCTION

In a cosmopolitan and multi-cultural society – where heated debates still revolve as to the legitimacy of applying culture-specific human rights policies universally – the imperative of delineating a shared ethic is of paramount importance. For this to succeed, however, and to be truly shared, a plurality of cultures should be able to subscribe to such an ethic without thereby forfeiting their own unique and informed perspectives on life and the world.

Taha Abderrahman holds that a critical window of opportunity remains open for theistic worldviews to collectively provide just that. However, it is his assertion that recent attempts to furnish a set of fundamental criteria, in the name of world religions, have failed to deliver on the promise. Drawing on the richness of Islamic theological systems as well as insight from his own intellectual project of over 30 years, our author endeavors to provide both a critical analysis and a corrective prescription.

The concern is that recent attempts by representatives of world religions to provide a foundation for a common global ethic concede so much ground to secularism, that their own affiliation to religion is rendered irrelevant. In effect, their participation in the formulation of a shared global ethic, as religionists, is of as much significance as their absence from the process. Their effort to deflect possible accusations of subjectivism, absolutism, and irrationality – the bugbears of secularism – has led them into a byway of contradictions vis-à-vis their own profession of a theistic-basis for their project. Ultimately, this causes secular conceptions of a common global ethic to appear superior, if only for the lack of self-contradicting premises that burden the outlook adopted by the religionists.

The project for a global ethic which is under consideration here, propounds the prevailing set of humanist values for human rights and civil society: *non-violence, solidarity, tolerance, and equality*. These four are common to all notions of human rights in the modern age whether they are religious or secular. However, the authors of the project have gone on to neglect the very principles that underlie theistic insight, *faith* and *praxis*. Their desire to gain the approval of secular audiences by negotiating the three core premises of secularism – privatization of religion, relativity of truth, and the hegemony of rationalism – has led to an untrammelled accommodation. This style of

accommodation effectively marginalizes any tangible contribution by the world's religions to the equation.

In Taha Abderrahman's analysis, any conception of a common global ethic warranting subscription by the world's religions must meet two conditions: the project must secure an effective role for religion in society, and it must also expand the remit of ethics itself. Furthermore, a successful joint enterprise would have to observe a specific set of criteria, in order to achieve its stated objective of embodying a particularly religious contribution to the ethical consciousness of the broader world community. Among these criteria, the project would have to demonstrate a cognizance of the link between religious affiliation and ethical conduct; further, it must be responsive to its own ethical prescriptions; and it must also contribute to developing the content of ethics itself.

Tabah Research is honored to present Dr Taha Abderrahman's timely critique. It exemplifies the type of critical engagement from a holistic Muslim perspective for which Tabah Research strives, and from which, it is hoped, a renewal of Muslim contribution to the world of ideas may flourish.

J Hashim Brown  
*Director of Research*

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**TAHA ABDERRAHMAN** is one of the most recognized philosophers and thinkers in the contemporary Arab world. Beginning in Morocco, his scholarly journey took him to Paris where he received a Ph.D. in 1972. His thesis was entitled “An Essay on the Linguistic Structures of Ontology”. In 1982 he went on to receive another Ph.D. in literature and humanities with a thesis entitled “An Essay on the Logic of Argumentative and Natural Reasoning”. He held the position of professor of curricula for logic and linguistics at the college of literature and humanities at Muhammad the Fifth University in Rabat; from 1970–2005. He is a representative of the International Society for the Study of Argumentation in Amsterdam; the Society of Intercultural Philosophy (Gesellschaft für Interkulturelle Philosophie) in Cologne. He received the Morocco Award

for Humanities in 1988 for his book *Fī uṣūl al-ḥiwār wa tajdīd ‘ilm al-kalām* (On the Foundations of Dialogue and the Renewal of Dialectic Theology); and again in 1995 for his book entitled *Tajdīd al-manhaj fī taqwīm al-turāth* (Renewing the Methodology for Appraising the Tradition). His many academic contributions include: *al-‘Amal al-dīnī wa tajdīd al-‘aql* (Religious Practice and the Renewal of Reason), *Ḥiwārāt min ajli al-mustaqbal* (Dialogues for the Sake of the Future), *al-Ḥaqq al-‘arabī fī al-ikhtilāf al-falsafī* (The Arab Right to Philosophical Disagreement), *Rūḥ al-ḥadāthah: al-madkhal ilā ta’sīs al-ḥadāthah al-islāmiyyah* (The Spirit of Modernity: Towards the Establishment of an Islamic Modernity), *al-Uṣūl al-akhlāqiyyah li al-maqāṣid al-shar’iyyah* (The Ethical Foundations of the Islamic Legal Objectives) (forthcoming).





# A GLOBAL ETHIC: ITS SCOPE AND LIMITS

TAHA ABDERRAHMAN

*In the name of Allah, Most Merciful, Most Beneficent*

An analytical and evaluative examination of the idea of a *global ethic*<sup>1</sup> requires that we begin by briefly making two clarifications: one conceptual, the other historical.

A. The **conceptual clarification** relates to the difference between the understanding of a *global ethic*, on the one hand, and a separate understanding which also signifies the collective ethics of individuals; namely, *universal ethics*.<sup>2</sup>

What is meant by *universal ethics* is that set of ethics whose principles and maxims were established through the activity of thinkers and philosophers, on a rational and objective basis; as such, every individual is obliged to adhere to them if he wishes to conduct himself conscientiously, or if he seeks happiness in his life. Two examples illustrating this are the “ethics of duty” established by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, and the “utilitarian ethics” whose principles were laid down by the English philosopher and jurist, Jeremy Bentham, expanded thereafter by his successor, the English philosopher John Stuart Mill.

*Universal ethics* is characterized accordingly by three essential traits. First, this ethical system is **speculative by nature**, as it is deduced by way of discursive intellectual speculation from a priori premises. Second, it is **singular in origin**: the individual philosopher being

self-reliant in his task, as his formulation of such a system does not require him to seek assent from others. Third, it is an ethical system which is **secular in orientation**, since its propounder circumvents the need to establish his tenets and conclusions upon axioms directly or palpably taken from religious tradition.

A *global ethic*, on the other hand, has none of the above traits; rather, it is characterized by their opposites. First, it is an ethical system of a **practical nature**, as it can be induced from man’s existential ethical experience. Second, it is a system of **multiple origins**, since there is an equal and collective participation in the determination of its maxims and rules. Third, it is **religious in orientation**, since it derives its values and tenets from the various religious traditions.

B. The **historical clarification** relates to the historical context in which the idea of a global ethic is crystallized.

Though the term *global ethic* was only coined in the year 1990,<sup>3</sup> the first idea of “an ethic which would unite the nations of the world” occurred in the context of a dialogue actively participated in by various religious traditions over the past century and a half, since the **first international conference of religions** held in Chicago in 1893,<sup>4</sup> and which later became known as the Parliament of the World’s Religions. This was conceived in celebration of the scientific and technological advances

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1. The French equivalent is *Éthique mondiale*; the German, *Weltethos*.

2. The French equivalent is *Éthique universelle*; the German, *Allgemeine Ethik*.

3. The development of globalization played a large role in the need for the term *global ethic*.

4. This conference was originally held under the title “The World’s Parliament of Religions”.

made by modernity, claiming “religious brotherhood” as one of its concomitants.

This endeavour was manifested in the establishment of religious dialogues relating to various themes, levels, and goals across the world, as well as in the foundation of numerous institutions and organizations, including the World Council of Churches and the World Conference on Religion and Peace. Despite the existence of this active movement for dialogue in various religious circles, the second gathering of the World’s Parliament of Religions was not convened until a century after the first, in the year 1993 and in the same American city, in honour of its centenary. However, only six years elapsed until the third gathering of this Parliament was convened in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1999.<sup>5</sup>

The second convention of the Parliament of the World’s Religions issued a declaration entitled *Toward a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration*. The conference organizers had commissioned the Swiss Catholic theologian, Hans Küng, to draft the Declaration due to his earlier work in this field entitled *Projekt Weltethos*, published in 1990 and preceding the conference by two years. After the latter had adopted the Declaration, this scholar took full advantage of this, successively delivering speeches, writing articles, and authored a number of works clarifying the outlines of his project and its goals, and all the while demonstrating the benefits of its applications and its aspirations. These include the following works, some of which he co-authored with others: *Erklärung zum Weltethos* (1993), *Ja zum Weltethos* (1995), *Weltethos für Weltpolitik und Weltwirtschaft* (1997), *Wissenschaft und Weltethos* (1998), and *Wozu Weltethos? Religion und Ethik in Zeiten der Globalisierung* (2002). Küng also became the president of the Global Ethic Foundation, established in Tübingen, Germany in 1995,<sup>6</sup> which took the topic of the Declaration as the core project of its work, and included amongst its goals the encouragement of further research, the convening of further conferences, as well as facilitating relationships between cultures and religions.

The Declaration which Küng had overseen was a key catalyst in encouraging the creation of a global ethic, with successive proclamations and reports taking up this initiative. Of particular note are:

- *Our Global Neighborhood* (1995), an initiative of

the Commission on Global Governance, commissioned by the United Nations; its second section dealt exclusively with the ethics of globalization.

- *Our Creative Diversity* (1995), an initiative of the World Commission on Culture and Development, commissioned by the United Nations, and published in conjunction with UNESCO.
- *Universal Declaration of Global Ethic* (1996), written by the American theologian Leonard Swidler.
- *Universal Declaration to Human Responsibilities* (1997), written by the InterAction Council, which is composed of former heads of state and government; it was presented to various heads of state and government, the United Nations, and UNESCO.
- UNESCO’s *Universal Ethics Project*, undertaken by the Division of Philosophy and Ethics of UNESCO, for which two large international meetings were held: the first in Paris under the title “Prolégomènes pour une éthique universelle” in 1997, and the second in Naples in the same year, to which some of the most famous philosophers of ethics were invited.
- *The Declaration of Human Rights and Responsibilities* (1999), an initiative of the Valencia Third Millennium Foundation, and presented to UNESCO for the celebration of the year 2000.
- *A Call to Our Guiding Institutions* (1999), published by the 1999 Parliament of the World’s Religions which was held in Cape Town; it reconfirmed the conclusions arrived at in the Second Parliament, and invited participating institutions to translate the conclusions into real action.

What concerns us foremost is to give due consideration to the proclamations issued by the Second Conference of World Religions, namely **the proclamations regarding a global ethic**. This document procured the signatures of a great number of prominent personalities from various religions, including some Muslims, the most notable being the prominent Indian scholar, Mohammad Hamidullah, and the Iranian intellectual, Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

5. The conference held in Cape Town called upon the participating social institutions to commit themselves to the shared ethical conclusions reached during the second conference, and to work towards their implementation.

6. *Stiftung Weltethos*. See the foundation’s website, <http://www.weltethos.org>.

## 1. AN ANALYSIS OF THE DECLARATION: TOWARD A GLOBAL ETHIC

After this prefatory review, we may now begin our analysis of the substance of this first declaration. The introduction to this declaration states that the impetus compelling its publication are the manifold crises the world faces, namely: an **economic crisis**, exemplified in poverty, starvation, unemployment, exploitation, disparity between rich and poor, and the enormous debt of the poorer nations; an **environmental crisis**, exemplified by the disequilibrium of environmental systems, due to the irrational plundering of the natural bio-resources; a **political crisis**, exemplified by the increase in ideological conflicts between people of faith representing various religious traditions, and the increasing tension and polarization between religionists and secularists, in addition to the violent conflicts already taking place; and a **social crisis** exemplified by a lack of concern for justice, the spread of chaos, the dissolution of the family, and the marginalization of the role of women.

The declaration then continues to construct its basic ethical principles upon what it deems to be four fundamental pillars:

1.1 The need for a **global ethic**; what this means is that **there can be no manifestation of a new global order to elevate us above these numerous crises without an ethic accepted by all nations**. Seeing that humanity is in this world like a single family, every individual partakes of the duty to bring about this new world order. This is, however, particularly incumbent upon those that uphold the religious traditions, insofar as they are bound to agree to a set of binding values, irrevocable standards, and fundamental moral attitudes. If the acceptance of such a duty is achieved, this would provide the minimal consensus necessary for the construction of a “global ethic” upon which plat-

form the human rights propounded by the UN Declaration would be established.

1.2 The **demand for humane treatment**; its exact wording being: “Every human being must be treated humanely.” What is intended thereby is the protection of every human being’s dignity, such that his fundamental rights may not be withheld, that he may not be used as a means for (the benefit of) others, and that his intrinsic value may not be determined by race, gender, age, skin colour, religion, language, national origin or social origin. Associated with this demand is a basic principle maintained by the religious traditions known as the Golden Rule, its negative formulation being: “What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others”; or in its positive formulation: “What you wish done to yourself, do to others!” No major religious tradition is bereft of some version or versions of this rule; in fact, several formulations of this rule are to be found in Islam, some augmenting it by positing the foundation of a person’s faith upon its observance. For example, we find the noble Prophetic traditions narrated in *The Branches of Faith*: “None of you truly believes until he desires for his brother what he desires for himself”;<sup>7</sup> and “Desire for others that which you desire for yourself and you will be a Muslim.”<sup>8</sup> It is quite obvious that this rule requires that one avoid every form of compulsion that arises from egoism and self-centeredness in everyday life.

1.3 **Four irrevocable directives**; these directives derive from the demand for humane treatment, and equally take two forms, one negative and one positive:

A. **Commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life**. The negative formulation of this commitment is “You shall not kill!”; the positive formulation, “Have respect for life!”

7. The Shi’ites narrate numerous Prophetic traditions and reports regarding this matter. For example, it is narrated on the authority of al-Sadiq (upon whom be peace) that the Prophet (blessings and benedictions of God be upon him and his family) said: “The most righteous of people is he who accepts for people what he accepts for himself, and hates for them what he hates for himself”; and that the Commander of the Faithful (upon whom be peace), upon writing to Muhammad b. Abu Bakr, said: “Love for the generality of your subjects what you love for yourself and your family, and hate for them what you hate for yourself and your family; for that is a greater proof of your rectitude, and a greater state of justice for your subjects.”

8. Al-Suyuti, *al-Jami’ al-Saghir*. Also, in *Sahih al-Bukhari*, it is narrated on the authority of Abu Hurayra that the Prophet (peace and blessings of God be upon him) said: “Abu Hurayra! Be scrupulous, and you will be the most worshipful of people. Be content with that which God has apportioned for you, you will be the richest of people. Love for the believing Muslims what you love for yourself and for your family, and dislike for them what you dislike for yourself and your family, you will be a believer. Be an excellent neighbour to your neighbours, and you will be a Muslim. Beware of excessive laughter, for in excessive laughter is the heart’s ruin.”

This commitment necessitates that disputes should be resolved peacefully, in a context of justice and equity; one must aim to raise young people upon this spirit of peaceful co-existence, as there can be no hope for the survival of humanity without world peace. This commitment also requires the avoidance of torture, physical or psychological, much less the taking of life. This commitment also necessitates, from another perspective, concern for the Earth's biosphere; for all created beings in this cosmos are all intertwined together and all dependent on each other. The proper and required relationship with nature should not be one of dominance over it, but rather one of living in harmony with it.

- B. Commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order.** The negative formulation of this commitment is "You shall not steal!"; the positive formulation, "Deal honestly and fairly!" In regards to private property, this commitment establishes a right which conversely necessitates duties towards others, such that the exercise of proprietary rights is tempered by the wider needs of society. This commitment also establishes the need to instill future generations with awareness of mercy, kindness, and care for those who are weak and poor. In fact, it requires that one go beyond the threshold of *social security* – embodied by the contingent assistance provided to individuals in need, and aid programs directed at some of the less affluent social groups – to a level in which the structures of the global economy must be fundamentally rebuilt with an eye to limiting excessive consumerism and reckless profiteering, converting the economic dynamic from that of competition for monopoly to one of service to humanity, in order to safeguard justice between nations; for **there is no global peace without global justice.**
- C. Commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness.** The negative construction of this commitment is "You shall not lie!"; the positive formulation, "Speak and act truthfully!" What is intended by this third commitment is that the representatives of religions avoid the disparagement of other beliefs and the distortion of their respective aims, and reject all grounds for hatred, prejudice and enmity towards the followers of other faiths.

Similarly, it is the responsibility of others – namely the mass media, artists, writers, scientists, politicians and rulers – to avoid all forms of manipulation of public opinion, deception, hypocrisy, misrepresentation, opportunism and mendacity in the spoken or written word. In addition, those representatives are also responsible for the education of future generations on honesty in thought, word and deed; for **there is no global justice without truthfulness and humaneness.**

- D. Commitment to a culture of equal rights, and partnership between men and women.** The negative construction of this commitment is "You shall not commit sexual immorality!"; the positive formulation, "Respect and love one another!" What is intended by this final commitment is the avoidance of all types of sexual exploitation, discrimination, and patriarchy directed at women, whether as adults or minors. Young men and women should be made aware that sexual intercourse is not an occasion for disempowering others, but rather a co-relationship of partners in the common pursuit of creation and the manifestation of life, when such acts are performed in a context of responsibility, and are representative of a mutual concern, love and trust; for **there is no authentic humaneness without a living together in partnership.**

- 1.4 The need for a transformation of consciousness.** Our world cannot be changed unless there is a transformation in the hearts of individuals and the consciousness of communities. Therefore, it is imperative that every individual and every community feels responsible for this change, and is mindful of the duty to awaken the latent spiritual capacity in each soul, by means of reflection, contemplation or prayer, or by means of positive thought.

In conclusion, the Declaration admits that it will be difficult to attain a universal consensus on many disputed individual ethical questions, whether they refer to biological and sexual ethics, the ethics of mass media, scientific ethics, or economic and political ethics. Nonetheless, the Declaration confirms the presumption that it is possible to draw benefit from the principles laid out within it in order to arrive at appropriate solutions. It also encourages the professional classes to draft pertinent codes of ethics specific to their profes-

sion, containing practical guidelines for real problems faced in their respective fields. Lastly, the Declaration calls upon the various faith communities to formulate their own specific ethics, clarifying what each of their own faiths have to say, for example, about the meaning of life and death, the enduring of suffering, joy, selfless sacrifice and compassion.

Having completed a review of the main points of a *global ethic* in the Declaration, we shall now begin with our appraisal and critique.



## 2. AN APPRAISAL OF THE DECLARATION: TOWARD A GLOBAL ETHIC

There is no doubt that this foundational undertaking by the Parliament of the World's Religions reveals an increasing awareness by contemporary religionists in two central matters:

**Firstly**, that the religious traditions are in need of dialogue and non-violent co-existence between them, and in need also of identifying positions held in common; the delegates to the Parliament felt this to be particularly poignant in light of the history of wars in Europe, believed to have been provoked by religion.

**Secondly**, that religious traditions remain able to take an active role in the world, despite the latter's wholehearted embracing of modernity, and its veering towards a globalism that may very well merge all quarters of the world economically, politically and culturally; in fact, it appears that the authors of the Declaration are setting the stage for a coming "religious globalism" built upon a shared ethic.

As for the importance of this awareness championed by the Declaration, we may take the opportunity to make two crucial comments:

Firstly, it does not suffice a global ethic to merely have a religious origin; rather, it is paramount that the ethic elevates the intrinsic and essential value of religion in this crisis-ridden world, in the same way it elevates the values that, as everyone agrees, can relieve these crises. These values are non-violence, solidarity, tolerance, and equality. There can be no elevation of this value [of religion] unless the global ethic elevates the position of religion and reinforces it; that is, unless it achieves what I term **assuring and establishing a firm place in the world for religion**. For the primary obligation of religious traditions is to pursue their own role as guides to mankind in that which benefits and perfects them, and to ensure the former's readiness to save humanity from imminent destruction. It is not incumbent upon the religious traditions to develop an ethic determined by some consensus which is then expected to supplant them, let alone to dispense with them altogether.

Secondly, it is not enough that a global ethic receives the unanimous agreement of the religious traditions; rather, it must be capable of elevating human ethical behaviour to a level beyond that which any given religion is able to do alone. Otherwise, there can be no benefit in a coalescence of religions for this purpose. There can be no elevation unless there is an improvement attained and a further development aimed at; that is, unless such a project achieves what I term **ethical progress in the world**. For what is required of a global ethic is that it provides mankind with the ethical wherewithal to make it capable of battling the global crises facing it in a way that any given single religious tradition is incapable of doing alone.

Following upon these two comments, we may now posit the following two questions:

First, **does the Declaration secure and establish for religion a firm place in the world?**

Second, **does the Declaration further the advancement of ethics in the world?**

Let us turn now to answering these questions in succession.

## 2.1 THE DECLARATION'S FAILURE TO MEET THE REQUIREMENT OF SECURING AND ESTABLISHING A FIRM PLACE FOR RELIGION

If we ponder the details of this Declaration, our attention is drawn to a number of stances adopted by its authors that betray an explicit dismissal of some of religion's most fundamental components. These stances shed light on the shortcomings of the Declaration towards our human condition, namely, the necessary requirement that any venture of a new ethic must buttress the position of religion in the world.

### 2.1.1 Articulations of the Declaration's failure to meet the requirement of securing and establishing a firm place for religion

The first such articulation is in its **omission of any recognizable religious bases**. The authors of the Declaration claim that their declaration is clearly based upon religion; as evidence for this, they state that they, the authors, possess a common belief in an Absolute Truth that transcends this world, and that their shared ethic is connected to this spiritual reality. However, if we examine the four basic principles of this declaration, no evidence will be found to support their contention that a Transcendent Reality informs their ethic's structure, nor do we find anything which declares that man's ethical development is by means of drawing closer to this Reality. Rather, we are given indications that all religions encourage this or that ethic, and that the spirit of one's religious heritage requires us to act in this way or that, whilst there being no intrinsic need for the very ethic or action in question. As such, it is hard to claim any truly religious grounds for the proposed global ethic, for such grounds require that there be spiritual foundations and transcendent realities from which such an ethic should be manifested. Instead, the Declaration suffices itself with *ascribing* to religious traditions innumerable ethics based upon a *need for humane*

*treatment* – namely non-violence, solidarity, tolerance, and equality – in a most general fashion. There is, however, a distinct difference between *ascribing something to religion* and *basing it upon religion*.

The second shortcoming towards a strengthening of the position of religion is the Declaration's **omission of the very name of God**. The authors of the Declaration considered it expedient not to preface their document with the name of God, contending that no consensus exists amongst the various religious traditions regarding God. In reality, the international conference encompassed four categories of religions, named respectively: the group of *Near Eastern religions of prophecy*, comprising Judaism, Christianity and Islam; the group of *Indian religions of mysticism*, comprising Hinduism and Buddhism; the group of *Far Eastern religions of wisdom*, comprising Confucianism, Taoism, and the Japanese religions; and finally the group of *naturalist religions of the people of Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Australia*. It is obvious that each of these religious groups' conception of a godhead is completely different and at times contradictory; some do not have a concept of a *Divine Essence*, while others believe in a plethora of gods without a supreme godhead.

Nevertheless, there is no justification for this omission. For if prefacing the Declaration in the name of God proved too trying for the reason provided above, it would not have been challenging to find some other idiom which would have furnished the same meaning for faith-holders, such as "In the name of Him Whom we worship", or "In the name of That which we believe in"; at the very least, the general phrase "In the name of that religion which we believe in" could have been used. However, the Declaration omitted any such mention, and, per se, remained as indistinguishable from any other declaration issuing from the secular establishment, such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

The third expression of the Declaration's shortcoming towards religion is in its **omission of "faith" as a term**. The authors of the Declaration intended that the delineated ethic be acceptable to non-religionists as well as to religionists. It is not surprising, therefore, that the very mention of faith is omitted from the list of ethical values, which the Declaration calls for as one of its four essential affirmations, notwithstanding the importance of faith for all religious traditions. So long as this spiritual value is of no importance to non-religionists, it will not be considered of universal value as are the other mentioned principles. The difficulty that results from

this, however, is that what is effectively being stated is that the consensus of the religionists alone is apparently insufficient as a basis to establish global values; and that it is also necessary to have the agreement of non-religionists. It is as if the religionists, in drafting the Declaration, have not only implicated themselves as representatives for their co-religionists, but inadvertently also for non-religionists.

Fourth, **there is no mention made of religious practice.** No encouragement of religious practice is found in the Declaration's schedule outlining the pillars on which the global ethic is to be built, let alone any discussion of its benefits towards the realization of such an ethic. A reader might even imagine that such a global ethic could be arrived at without the application of any religious practice whatsoever; nor would this presumption be dispelled by the Declaration's mention of prayer as a means towards establishing correct behaviour and changing hearts. The above statement loses its value by virtue that it makes prayer – that which the religions hold to be based on revelation and a means of drawing closer to God – secondary in relation to “meditation” as used by the paths of wisdom, or to “contemplation” as used by the paths of spiritualism. In fact, this fleeting reference is further trivialized by the mention of “positive thinking” which immediately follows it, and in itself considered as yet another means of moral change. Prayer, therefore, that is to say, the path of worship steeped in faith and practice, is given no precedence over the path of mere cerebral reflection, such as “positive thinking”, which is far from the kernel of faith and practice. In other words, it is contended that the culmination of prayer, namely spirituality itself, may simply be arrived at by means of a potentially non-religious activity such as “positive thinking”.

Based upon the preceding critique of the Declaration – namely, the omission of religious bases, the omission of the name of God, the omission of faith, and the omission of religious practice – it becomes apparent that this declaration, even if drafted by religionists, does not strengthen the position of religious adherence in the world; it neither raises its status nor reinforces its venerable position. This is because the two formative elements of religious adherence – faith and practice – have been sidelined in the process of this ethic's constitution. According to this declaration, due consideration of religious faith limits the globalist aspect of this ethic, and as a result religious faith becomes largely sidelined. Likewise, the Declaration establishes that anything attained by religious practice can just as readily be arrived at by other means, even by that which is

inimical to it.

The unexpected conclusion that one necessarily assumes *infra* is that the creation of a global ethic is in no dire need of religion. This is an explicit contradiction, of course, to the very original motivation behind the incipient and positive intent of this project. Once this conclusion has been reached, an even more perplexing deduction necessarily follows, namely: **that the secularists are more adept at constituting a global ethic in accordance with the method of the Parliament of World Religions than the adherents of religious traditions.** Let us now clarify how this can be inferred.

### 2.1.2 Secularism and the global ethic

Secularism is naturally based on three facets: the *circumscription of religion*, the *implications of the diffracting and multiple versions of religious truth*, and the *rule of reason*. It is incumbent upon us to show how each of these principles assists in the establishment of a global ethic.

- A. The circumscription of religion: The upshot of this first principle is that religion, as it is practised, becomes relegated to the private sphere of the individual. In this, secularism is more candid than the Parliament of the World's Religions in that its adoption of a position of circumscription is coherent and not self-contradictory; secularism calls people to the above principle, and acts in accordance with it, while the Parliament beckons to its contrary – holding that religious faith is something shared amongst all religionists – but does not act in accordance with the logical consequence of such a position.

This principle of circumscribing the sphere of religion, necessarily leads to certain conclusions that emancipate any global ethic drawn up by secularists from a charge of subjectivism:

First, that **religion cannot infringe upon others.** From the perspective of a secularist, the presence of religionists at a world conference which elects to draft a document of ethics that also includes non-religionists, is tantamount to proving the former's presence futile; for their presence and their influence thereof to the content of this universal document would be determined and offset by the presence of non-religionists and their respective effect.

Second, that **religion cannot be inextricably con-**

**joined with social interaction.** So long as secularism denies the significance of acts that are informed by religious faith, it will continue to curtail any extension of religion beyond the personal realm, in order that such acts may not impact on others who may not share those beliefs.

Third, that **no global ethic can be derived from religion.** Religion, according to secularism, is a personal matter, and as such is clearly unfit to lead to any ethics other than that of a type that is commensurate with its curtailed understanding, namely personal ethics. Naturally, a global ethic cannot be established on a distinct personhood; **it can only come about through the partnership of a society, in accordance with the common understanding that binds them together.**

- B. The multiplicity of truth:** The consequence of this principle is not only that truth has numerous manifestations, but that it is essentially manifold. In this, secularism is again more forthcoming and candid than the Parliament, in that **secularism's stance regarding the multiplicity of religious truth is consonant with its principle, and not self-contradictory;** it makes note of the existence of multiple religions, and that the legitimacy of this multiplicity is predicated upon the legitimacy of the multiplicity of cultures. The Parliament, on the other hand, admits to the reality of multiple religions, but falls silent as to the principal legitimacy of such a position.

The principle of the multiplicity of truth necessarily leads to conclusions that emancipate any global ethic founded by secularists from the charge of absolutism:

First, that **truth is changing and is not fixed.** The constraints of place and the implications of passing history, whose alterative effect can never be said to diminish, have a large bearing on "reality"; reality, in turn, changes in accordance with alterations in time and place. The global ethic adopted by the secularists, therefore, must necessarily be receptive to change, so that any agreement, per se, on such an ethic should allow future review on the basis that any consequent flexibility is a resource of enrichment and continuity – a feature that is deficient in other ethical systems which have a predilection to formal fixity due to their correspondence to immutable realities.

Second, that **multiplicity results in tolerance.** The

secularist's position that religious realities are manifold requires an admission of the multiplicity of subjectively held truths, and requires the secularist himself to believe that the subjective "truth" of another is just as valid as his own truth, and that *his* "truth" is just as capable of being "false" objectively as the "truth" of the other; all this, however, without actually causing any vacillations in his own belief of his subjective "truth".

Third, that **no religion is superior to another.** According to secularism, the differences between religions are not differences as to that which is true, but inversely as to that which is false; that falsehood is essentially one, even though its forms may differ. Insofar as the various religions may be said to share equally in falsehood, it becomes essential that a global ethic is arrived at independently of the religious practices established by the religious traditions.

- C. The rule of reason:** The consequence of this third principle is that there is no objective authority for judgment in any matter save human reason, in view of the fact that the possession of a rational faculty continues to be a capacity shared equally by all people. In this, secularism is again preferable to the Parliament in that the position it advocates of **the relationship between ethics and rationalism is, once more, coherent and not self-contradictory,** contrary to the position of the Parliament of the World's Religions. Insofar as the desired ethic is to be shared amongst all nations, the secularist considers it to be a rational ethic, while the Parliament considers it to be a religious ethic, at the same time holding that religions differ in accordance with cultural differences.

The principle of the rule of reason necessarily leads to conclusions that emancipate a global ethic founded by secularists from the charge of irrationalism:

First, that **reason can pronounce on all things.** The secularist removes from human reason all limitations, so there remains nothing that is inconceivable by it, and rejects all other means which might replace the rational faculty, or indeed surpass it in rank. Once such a conviction is crystallised in the secularist's view, his consequent reflections on a global ethic would induce him to validate as true and beneficial judgments attained by him thereby, due to his belief that reason cannot be other than in a state of perpetual improvement.



Second, that **reason is autonomous**. The secularist believes that reason does not rely on anything outside of itself in order to attain the standards which maintain its function and determine its direction. Therefore, a global ethic established by it would be guided by principles derived solely from reason itself; reason itself then becoming both subject to and the very means by which the ethic is articulated.

Third, that **reason places all religious revelatory texts on an equal footing**. The secularist believes that a religious text has no collaborative role alongside reason, save one of subservience and subjection to its authority. According to the secularist, religious texts per se particularly contradict the judgments arrived at by reason, and as such are all equal in value. The only criterion which can establish a preference for one over another, or give precedence to one over another – namely the underlying principles of rationalism – is utterly missing in religious texts from the outset in the secularist's estimation. Therefore, the irrationalism which produces these texts can only be one and the same, even if this irrationality is coloured by differing hues.

From the above, we can only conclude that secularists are more proficient in establishing a global ethic than those religionists who authored the aforementioned Declaration. Their prescriptions for an ethical system are entirely consistent with their notions of religion, truth, and reason, in contrast with those of the Declaration's religionist authors which are not. Likewise, the secularist position is free from the three charges of *subjectivism*, *absolutism*, and *irrationalism*, while the position of the said religionists is not. Thus, if the religionists choose to deconstruct the global ethic of religion – as members of the Parliament of the World's Religions chose to do – in order to appease the non-religionists, the logic of such a *raison d'être* will by necessity prove specious, and, as a result, will diminish entirely their legitimacy to pronounce on such an ethic.

We have now completed our response to the first question, and demonstrated that the Declaration can serve no role in **affirming and strengthening the position of religion in the world**; in fact, it has become apparent that the secularist is more suited to develop such a global ethic. We now turn our attention to answering the second question: whether this Declaration provides any **advancement** in ethics.



## 2.2 THE DECLARATION'S FAILURE TO MEET THE REQUIREMENT OF ETHICAL ADVANCEMENT

There are, actually, three expressions of the Declaration's failure to meet the requirement of ethical advancement. The first is that some of the values that the Declaration aspires to are unattainable thereby, such as world peace. The second is that those values which are attainable are of lesser importance than those that are truly needed. The third is that the values which should have been attained were not attained, such as faith. Let us discuss each one in greater detail.

### 2.2.1 Instances of the Declaration's failure to meet the requirement of ethical advancement

The first failure concerns the Declaration's inability to achieve its own stated aim of world peace. If we read Hans Küng's *Toward a Global Ethic*, from which the Declaration issued, we find that the author's subtitle to the work is "World peace through peace among religions". He begins the introduction to the book by stating four given premises, three of which he states explicitly, and the fourth implicitly.

"There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions." (explicit)

"There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions." (explicit)

"There will be no dialogue between religions without an agreement over shared ethical values, that is, a global ethic." (implicit)

"Mankind cannot survive without a global ethic." (explicit)

From these premises, it may be inferred that Küng's main concern was the improvement of human character; his apparent intention is to work towards an ultimate value for nations and individuals which, until now, has not been attained: world peace.

Though Küng is correct in calling for peace, insofar as it is a noble value which would elevate mankind, a fallacy has nevertheless crept into his first premise, "No peace among the nations, without peace between the religions!". The premise's phrasing – in universal and negative terms – may be interpreted, not to mean that one of the conditions of "world peace" is the existence of "religious peace", just as other conditions are the existence of "economic peace" or "social peace", but rather **"that which prevents peace in the world is the existence of war between religions"**, such that if this barrier was removed, world peace would be realized. It would not be far-fetched to suggest that Küng's statement is an echo of an idea which has become firmly implanted in the minds of many, due to the frequency of its repetition in print and spoken word – an idea repeated again and again across the years with enduring power, until the advent of its most recent manifestation in the form of a "clash of civilizations", namely, the concept that states that **"the origin of all wars is religion"**.

Our present task would be unduly prolonged were we to be diverted by the refutation of this idea; it shall suffice us for now to mention three objections which cast doubt on its validity:

- A. If this idea were true, it would apply only to some religions; or, to be more precise, it would apply to certain religious tendencies existing within the potential expressions of these religions, namely, the propensities of a religious extremist. An example of this condition, to which such an idea truly applies, is the Hundred Year's War between Catholics and Protestants in France, which encompassed practically the whole of the sixteenth century.
- B. This idea might very well identify the metaphysical properties which often *instigate* war, such as faith or the desire for salvation. But the truth is that the *causes* of war are many and complicated, admixed with all types of mundane and worldly interests, although clearly some wars may be dominated by one cause or another. To my mind, it is quite apparent that religious grounds are never the true causes for war.

- C. This idea intentionally ignores a basic reality, that religion is often manipulated and used for ulterior purposes. It is not uncommon for the fires of war to be stoked for reasons unconnected to religion, but that those who ignite such fires then proceed to use religion as a justification, or in order to garner support. In such instances, religion itself becomes a victim of their mundane wars, no different than if they were at war with religion itself; thus religion is far from being the cause, as is claimed.

If the presumption that religion is the root cause of war is rebutted, then it logically follows that the belief that world peace is singularly predicated on peace as between religions is equally false. It is especially so considering that religion, according to those who uphold such a presumption, has become limited to a subjective belief in the supernatural with no role to play in regulating social institutions in the world. If the latter is true, to what extent then should religion have any say over world affairs? The reality is that religion has no power to ignite the flames of war in today's world; rather, religions have become the kindling which is consumed in the process. Religion is the pretext employed by the great nations for the true rationale of war: unlimited power. Matters of religion may very well be used as a smokescreen for the real, underlying interests; to this end, it is religion that is being attacked to the same degree that it is considered the nominal enemy.

If it is true to say that world peace is not the responsibility of religionists alone, it would be also correct to contend that there is no hope that an accord of religions – the object of the Parliament of the World's Religions – will be able to lift human ethics by attaining this goal. All that such an agreement might achieve is an occasion for the encouragement of world peace, from a standpoint of reproach and advice. As for peace, insofar as it is a lofty human goal – regardless of whether it is global or otherwise – there is no world religion worthy of the name that does not adamantly call for peace, and work towards its realization insofar as it is able, beginning with their emphasis on the need for good association between two given individuals, as a prelude to peaceful relations between two given nations. It is sufficient as an example to examine the mode of greeting used by the revealed religions at the commencement of any word or deed involving another – that is to say the articulation of the word "peace".

The second instance of the Declaration's failure to meet the requirement of ethical advancement is that **it incorporates only the most minimal level of ethics.**

Küng admits that it suffices a “global ethic” to participate on such a level of ethics common to all religions; namely, and as already mentioned, a collection of binding values, fixed standards, and personal fundamental attitudes. It is obvious that any set of shared ethics can only be minimalist, such that all religious traditions can agree upon despite their divergence. It necessarily follows, therefore, that the main ethical components which comprise the “global ethic” will be less than those which may be found in the least of religions, since any given religion will include – in addition to the shared values of the “global ethic” – its own particular components which are not shared by others; were it to be otherwise, any religion’s doctrine of ethics would itself be the “global ethic”, which is obviously not the case.

One may object, stating that the Parliament of the World’s Religions has placed all the religions on an equal footing and, as such, no religion can be considered superior or inferior, preferred or disregarded in relation to any other. The reply to such an objection is that the parity accorded is simply in relation to their acceptance *as a religion*, which is a palpable right of any religious tradition. However, the equality is not in relation to their particular and composite characteristics, namely their beliefs, values, principles and ideal models. Nor is this equality in regards to a religion’s intrinsic value, for otherwise the statements of the Parliament would be unintelligible and nonsensical; it would require the abandonment of any sincere measure of *objectivity*, let alone a measure of *truth*. For if one were to claim all religions to be equally true, despite all of their contradictory beliefs and conflicting principles, and deemed them all to be realities of equal worth, one would thereby effectively be denying the truth of them all, and deem them all be false, as there would be no reason for one to believe in one religion over another, nor to even believe in *religion* at all.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the disparity between religions cannot be denied insofar as their constituent elements differ quantitatively, nor is it impossible that one be preferred due to the nature of either of these elements, their values, or their impact. If not for the existence of differences between religions’ particular fundamentals – in fact, if not for the existence of distinction of some religions above others – there would be no absolute need to organize conferences and gatherings between them; there would be no need to seek consensus regarding some of the particular common features, nor would there be a

need to arrive at any shared positions.

If we accept that the global ethic, as presented by the Declaration, represents a minimalist set of ethics – at least in the number of its constituent elements – it becomes clear that it is not capable of improving the ethical condition of mankind anymore than any particular religion can do on its own. For the capacity of this system to impart ethics remains far below the system of any single religion. Furthermore, even the most negligible of religious traditions is quite capable of raising even this limited set higher than this declaration is able to, for even such a “humble” religion has two factors which this declaration has no place for, factors which contribute to a real improvement of human character. First, it establishes these shared ethics upon religious practice, since each religious person’s share of these ethics is proportionate to the extent of his immersion in this practice: the greater his practice, the more perfect his saturation with these ethics; the weaker his practice, the less saturated he becomes. The ethics are effectively unattainable save through religious practice. Second, each religion is comprised of specific principles and maxims which determine the standards according to which the religionist ought to behave; the exigencies and circumstances of life are then the actual testing grounds for the effectiveness of the ethical values of that religion.

The third instance of the Declaration’s failure to meet the condition of ethical advancement is that **the Declaration lacks the very foundation stone of every religion – faith**. Küng rejects the account that the *Declaration of a Global Ethic* is the basis of an all-encompassing global religion alongside the existing religions, or that of a synthetic religion comprised of all existing religions,<sup>10</sup> due to two considerations. First, this declaration cannot take the place of the Holy Books – the Torah of the Jews, the Sermon on the Mount of our master Jesus, the Qur’an of the Muslims, the Bhagavad Gita of the Hindus, the teachings of Buddha, or the Analects of Confucius – because each book is the basis of that particular faith’s beliefs and practices, if not the very source of its life and existence. Second, these books provide integral ethical systems, in relation to which the declaration forms nothing other than a nucleus.

Though we may concede to Küng the point that the Declaration cannot replace the revealed religious books, and that these books provide integral ethical

9. This is a necessary result of the view espousing “the absolute relativity of religion”, the greatest threat to all religions.

10. See H. Küng and K. J. Kuschel, *Manifeste pour une éthique planétaire*, p. 6 and p. 75.

systems, we cannot, on the other hand, concede that the Declaration forms the core of these ethics. This is because the nucleus of a thing ought to encompass the essential elements of the matter for which it is the nucleus, such that if these elements were to become fully manifested, the matter itself would come into existence. The ethic of the Declaration, however, does not contain all the essential elements of a religious ethic, and as such cannot serve as a nucleus thereof. For the first essential element of a religion, without which it would not be a religion at the outset, is omitted in this Declaration, despite the fact that Küng had unmistakably acknowledged the essential centrality of this element for all religions – namely, *faith* itself. As such, no declaration can posit itself as the nucleus of a religious ethic until it includes this essential element of *faith*, and places it in its due exalted position.

As a result, the Declaration ought not only to make mention of faith as a distinctive component of the Parliament of the World's Religions, but also to make it one of the very directives upon which the Declaration is based. For just as this declaration is built upon “a culture of non-violence”, “a culture of solidarity”, “a culture of tolerance”, and “a culture of equal rights”, it also should have been imperative that it be built upon “a culture of faith”. It was completely unwise – contrary to what the authors may believe – to exclude faith; no person striving to be truly ethical can do without faith, not only because faith is a necessary concern in and of itself, but rather because the very purpose of the Declaration can only be realized through faith – namely, ethics. **Faith is the very spirit that elevates the ethics of man; it is faith that permits man's ethics to be elevated as if it inhabits a higher realm.** The four characteristics which the Declaration calls towards – non-violence, solidarity, tolerance, and equal rights – if not accompanied by faith, will ultimately not amount to anything more than a balance of benefits; however, with, faith at its heart, these benefits take the form of divinely bestowed gifts – and what a difference there is between a mere “benefit” and a “Divine gift”.

Furthermore, the declaration ought to have placed the directive of *faith* above all others, since faith is the very basis of a global ethic. Moreover, this imperative should have been worded just as the other four directives were, in a phrase such as “**Commitment to a culture of faith and a respect for religion**”. If this had been done, the Declaration would have been more coherent, and would have fulfilled its obligation of convincing non-religionists to respect the religious traditions just as they respect the rights of others. The lack of such a

directive in the Declaration is highlighted strongly by the widespread mockery of prophets (upon whom be peace), and the defamation of the religions which they brought. Until now, there exists no document issued by any world organization of any import which declares the necessity of such respect in the same way it declares the necessity for respecting human rights. If the Declaration had made explicit mention of such a directive, and had emphasized its centrality, we would have been closer to the legislation of an international law barring the type of extremism which incites acts against religions, especially as there is currently a great push for ISESCO, the United Nations, and other international bodies to formally adopt the Declaration.

As a result of the Parliament's misplaced zeal in appeasing non-religionists in order that they accept the Declaration and adopt its ethic, it has completely squandered the rights of the religionists themselves, and has stripped them of any protection against the oncoming future challenges and harmful events which they are soon to face. It is certain that this appeasement will not cause the non-religionists – or the secularists – to accept it at all; rather, it has weakened the cogency of the Declaration and compromised its purpose.

Thus, it has become apparent that the Declaration, through its omission of faith, has actually become a barrier to the advancement of human virtue. It has not succeeded in ameliorating the ethics of believers, because faith is the very basis of their moral improvement; it is not possible to make any ethical improvement except by an increase in faith itself. The Declaration, through this omission, has acted towards decreasing their faith, and as such will not improve their ethics. Nor will it succeed in improving the ethical standing of the secularists, until they desist from persistently abusing believers in the matter of their beliefs; such people will never acquiesce to an ethic established by the people of a belief-system which contradicts their own, even if the particular ethic was of the same type as theirs. Note how they feel that they are more adept at arriving at this ethic without any need for faith, while the religionists are incapable thereof.

In short, the answer to the second question is that the **Declaration: Toward a Global Ethic did not succeed in its declared aim of ethical progress.** It wished to use the ethics of the religions, collectively, to uplift humanity in a way that no single religion can do alone. However, it has become apparent that any single religion is more capable of making ethical progress than this agreed-upon Declaration, by virtue of what each

religion contains of faith-based possibilities and practical means which far surpass those of the Declaration. Therefore, it becomes incumbent that we seek instead such ethical progress from each religion.

If this is accepted, it becomes necessary to ask: **Is ethical progress the same in all religions, or does each religion have its own particular type of progress, the quality of which may be better or worse than that of another religion?** In other words, instead of seeking out ethical progress in any and all religions, should we not rather investigate which religion offers the greatest ethical progress?



### 2.2.2 The one religion and the global ethic

We have mentioned that the credal and practical makeup of religions differ in both number and type; it is not possible for such a disparity of constituent elements as between religions to exist save that it result in each religion having a different effect upon its practitioner. **If the constituent elements of religions differ, the effects thereof will necessarily differ, the first being the religion's ordering of values.** Therefore, a religion's ethical system will differ in type and in variety from one religion to another, just as the constituent elements of the religion which result in these various ethical values differ. As such, we may ask: **When is a particular religion more apt to provide ethical progress than another; and what are the standards by which the ethical advance of a religion may be assessed?**

**The standards of ethical progress:** It is not difficult for

us to provide these standards, once we simply reflect upon the requirements of the Declaration in terms of method and content; such reflection will lead us to derive four essential standards for such progress, such that were any religion to achieve them completely, such aptitude would prove greater than that of any other partially successful religion. These conditions are:

- A. **Awareness of the connection between religiosity and acquisition of ethical values:** That particular religion must surpass others in its recognition of the inescapable connection which exists between religious practice and ethical behaviour. This criterion is clearly the very practical basis upon which every type of ethical behaviour is contingent, and remains – as has become apparent – a point that has escaped the drafters of the Declaration.
- B. **Adopting the necessary ethical directives:** Such a religion must have a more expansive set of ethical directives than that of another religion. It is apparent that such a breadth requires that such a religion incorporates at least the five ethical directives, only four of which are cited by the Declaration.
- C. **Expanding the realm of ethics:** Such a religion must be capable of broadening the field of ethics in a manner unlike any other religion has done. This prerequisite necessarily follows from the second directive of the Declaration, entitled “Every human being must be treated humanely”, since the reality of humane treatment is nothing other than ethical treatment; **the more a religious person treats others ethically – whatever that type of interaction may be – the more humane the treatment will be.**
- D. **Progressive ethical development:** Such a religion should have appeared at a historical stage of ethical development wherein there is a successive inheritance of the ethical heritage of a preceding religion. This standard stems from the universal character of ethics adopted by the Declaration, and which assumes one **continuous ethical history** for humanity. It follows that the nations of this world have passed through numerous ethical epochs, and that any succeeding epoch represents an advance over the preceding epoch, by virtue of a principle of a historical accumulation of ethical principles over time.<sup>11</sup>

11. Just as a person accumulates experience and knowledge by interacting with objects over time, likewise there exists an accumulation of ethical behaviour and habits that one acquires by interacting with others over time.

If we apply these four standards to the religions – though, of course, this effort could hardly be accomplished by one person – we will necessarily arrive at a binary classification of religions: those religions which fulfil some of the standards, and those which fulfil all of the standards. The object of our search is obviously to be found in the second category, though it might contain more than one religion. If this were the case, we must then set a higher measure by which we could choose the most capable of them in advancing human ethics as is required; one religion that would be the source for a world ethic. We may phrase this new standard as follows:

- **The religion must reach the highest degree of fulfilling each of these four standards, in the following manner:**
  - Such a religion will achieve the highest degree of fulfilling *the standard of awareness of the connection between religion and the acquisition of ethical values* only **when the connection between the two reaches the degree of complete congruence**, such that there is no ethical behaviour without religious practice, nor religious practice without ethical behaviour.
  - Such a religion will reach the highest degree of honouring *the standard of adopting the five ethical directives* only **when these directives become firmly established, particularly the directive of faith** – that is, “the commitment to a culture of faith and a respect for religion” – being given **precedence over the remaining directives**.
  - Such a religion will reach the highest degree in satisfying *the standard of expanding the realm of ethics* **when it raises the status of mundane activity to a religious level, resulting in an expansion of ethical behaviour**, in the same way as religiously-based activity does.
  - Such a religion will achieve the highest degree in fulfilling *the standard of progressive ethical development* only **when it represents the final epoch of ethical flowering**, that peak to which all religions aspire.

Thus, when a religion rises to this elevated standard, it can be said to preside pre-eminently over other religions, and can be easily singled out; deserving consequently to have its respective ethical values disseminated amongst all people.

Since this occasion does not permit us to furnish a full comparison between religions of this second category, we might perhaps be allowed to study one in detail; in that if it becomes apparent to us that it fulfils the requirements set by this standard, we will suffice ourselves therewith. We will also naturally presume it to be more advanced and in conformity with the global ethic. If, on the other hand, objections are raised as to our choice, such objections would have to be put to proof to show whether any other religion deserves such a status.

**2.2.3 Applying the highest standard to the religion of Islam:** It is only natural that one begins with one’s own religion, and applies to it the standard mentioned, in order to assess the wholeness of its ethical framework. In this way, let us test Islam, the religion of my own choice, against the said standard, and let us see if this religion is capable of truly fulfilling the four standards of ethical advancement.

**A. Congruence between religious practice and ethical behaviour:** Islam has always made one of the primary aims of its message the perfection of the virtues, a process initiated in earlier religions. This is explicitly mentioned in the Prophetic tradition: “I have been sent to perfect the most honourable of character traits.” Everything which Islam enjoins – whether it is physical or spiritual acts – is a means by which **an increase in human ethics** is achieved. Essentially, this perfection takes one of three forms.

The first is through **augmentation**, that is, by adding to previous ethical principles a new and previously unknown dimension. Let us take, for example, the ethical trait of sincerity. “Sincerity” is, of course, a lofty trait. Beyond it, however, lies “sincerity in sincerity”, which holds an even loftier status: “sincerity in sincerity” necessitates that one not even *perceive* one’s very sincerity in one’s actions.

The second form is that of **discovery**, that is, by opening onto a previously existing ethical trait a dimension which was hitherto completely unknown. Let us take, for example, the concept of injurious behaviour. Islam recognizes and forbids the concept of “self-harm”, let alone “harming others”; in fact, Islam identifies “harming others” as an offshoot of “harming one’s self”. However, Islam adds to this concept of linkage new dimensions which had not been associated with “inflicted injury” before, such as the doctrine of “associating partners with the Godhead”.

The third form is that of **construction**, that is, of establishing new ethical traits which were not previously recognized. A sufficient example of this are the ethical standards of war which Islam sets, such as the prohibition of any mutilation of the enemy's dead, the cutting of trees, the burning of fields, and the destruction of homes.

**B. Consideration of the five definitive ethical directives, while giving precedence to the specific directive of faith over the rest:** The scholars of Islam are unanimous in that the Islamic Sacred Law is built upon what is called the "Five Necessary Objectives" (*al-maqasid al-daruriyya al-khams*). If we were to compare between these five objectives, and the five directives mentioned, we will find a remarkable degree of correspondence that becomes apparent when the two categories are juxtaposed:

- "A commitment to a culture of faith and a respect for religion" – which may be summarily abbreviated to "respect for religion" – corresponds to the objective of *preservation of religion*.
- "A commitment to a culture of non-violence and a respect for life" – which may be summarily abbreviated to "respect for life" – corresponds to the objective of *preservation of life*.
- "A commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness" – which may be summarily abbreviated to "truthfulness in life" – corresponds to objective of *preservation of the intellect*.
- "A commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order" – which may be summarily abbreviated to "a just economic order" – corresponds to the objective of *preservation of property*.
- "A commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women" – which may be summarily abbreviated to "partnership between men and women" – corresponds to the objective of *preservation of lineage*.

Even though the latter four objectives themselves effectively include and guarantee the preservation of religion – as understood by the fact that its preservation is solely dependent on the laws of the Islamic Sacred Law – Muslim scholars are unanimous in stating that the ultimate objective of *preservation of religion* is to be given precedence over any other. This is only due to their profound insight that all of these other objec-

tives can be preserved if needs be, by means of laws other than the religious law. We have already discussed the consequences of omitting this obligation from the Declaration, as it reduces it to an incomplete declaration, unbecoming to the status of religionists; such a declaration is more suited to non-religionists and the values they represent.

**C. Elevating mundane activity to the station of the sacred:** By virtue of the Prophetic tradition, "Actions are only judged according to intentions", Islam has placed spiritual values on a high level. The foremost amongst these values are three: sound intention, honesty, and sincerity. By means of this, Islam has been able to expand the concept of *religious activity* to incorporate that which had not been previously considered part of its domain; as such, that which was not technically *an act of worship* becomes one thereby, and that which was not technically *a means of drawing closer to God* becomes such. Take, for example, the two explicitly *worldly* activities of commercial trade and marital relations: by intending them to be acts for the obedience of God's commands, they become forms of worship drawing upon God's pleasure, just as one is rewarded by God for conventional types of worship.

Of particular relevance here is that the very possibility of expanding the sphere of *worship*, as exercised by Islam, renders this religion capable of overcoming the challenge posed by the flux of worldly activity, for it is capable of renewing its application of ethics to suit. In this scheme, every type of novel activity becomes a means for its perpetrator to aspire to ethical qualities specific to it, if it is combined with an intention to serve God thereby.

**D. Entering the final epoch of human ethics:** It is common knowledge that the revealed monotheistic faiths represent a stage following that of the polytheistic religions, though the latter, of course, still continue to exist in our time. This demonstrates that religions benefit from the accumulation of ethical principles over time, similar to how human knowledge benefits from the accumulation of previous knowledge. As such, a monotheistic religion would have an ethic more advanced than a polytheistic religion. It is also common knowledge that the religion of Islam, by virtue of its being the final religion, represents the final stage in the ethical development by way of unitarianism (*tawhid*). As a result, Islam adds to the ethical capacities which it already shares with previous religions new capacities specific to it alone. This is solely on the basis that the ethical period which mankind is living through to-

day is, in reality, one which belongs to Islam, one not shared by any other religion, whether monotheistic or polytheistic. As such, the Muslims are themselves morally responsible for the actions of mankind in this era. For every religion has two eras: an **ethical era**, which is the period of time between its revelation until it is superseded by the revelation of a new religion – and as Islam is the final religion after which no other religion is revealed, it is most suitable not only for this era but also all that follow; and a **historical era**, which is the period of time between its revelation and the time it is brought to an end by people who no longer believe in it – this is the only “era” in which other religions commonly share with the religion of Islam.

Therefore, if we accept that the ethic of a single religion is that which is capable of fulfilling our need for a global ethic, and not the seemingly impotent ethic contained in the Declaration; and if we also accept that the religion of Islam aptly fulfils all the standards of ethical advancement; then we may correctly conclude – at least until some contrary evidence is provided – that Islam is the religion most capable of fulfilling the ethical demands necessary to extricate our contemporary world from the social, economic, political and environmental crises which it faces.



**I**N CONCLUSION, let us summarize the above by stating that the Declaration issued by the Parliament of the World's Religions calls for four central values: solidarity, tolerance, non-violence, and equality. These values were chosen due to the universality they enjoy amongst all religions, and because they come under the rubric of the Golden Rule, also shared by all religions. However, the Declaration omits the two values upon which religion itself is built, namely *faith* and *practice*. This omission came about because, according to the Declaration's authors, these two values are not truly universal; the authors sought thereby to elicit acceptance of their global ethic by non-religionists. However, by this omission, they have foregone two imperative needs:

Firstly, **the imperative need for securing and establishing for religion a firm place in the world:** by foregoing this, they have effectively handed the primacy of establishing a global ethic – as propounded by the Declaration – over to the non-religionist, because the non-religionist's stance is considered more coherent, and such adherence to secular principles considered more capable for the realization of an ethic which is free of any religious consideration.

Secondly, **the imperative need to raise the status of ethics in the world:** as a result of the aforementioned, any one religion is more capable than the Declaration in realizing ethical advancement, Islam being the best representative religion, namely because Islam shares the ethical capacities of other revealed religions and expands them further.

Based upon this critique of the Declaration, a number of conclusions of the utmost importance can be arrived at. These conclusions disprove a number of positions regarding the relationship of ethics and religious traditions which have become so established in people's minds that they appear to be self-evident truths:

**The first conclusion** is that there are only two paths to attaining a global ethic: either the path chosen by the secularists, by means of removing all connection with religion thereto; or the path of a single religion, by means of preserving the imperative need for religion itself thereby.

**The second conclusion** is that the business of the Parliament of the World's Religions should not be one of conviction *vis-à-vis* the positions of the non-religionists, or that it actively pursue their recognition even at the cost of contradicting its own principles. To the con-



trary, the imperative need should be to convince secularists of the **universality of religion, the reasonability of adhering to its teachings, and the realistic need to return to it in order to solve today's world crises.**

**The third conclusion** is that a global ethic is not merely that which the majority of people and nations agree upon, for it is possible that they may agree upon a falsehood or by way of coercion. Rather, a global ethic is **to demonstrate by force of evidence that it is capable of warding off the global ethical challenges we face.**

**The fourth conclusion** is that interfaith dialogue should not be concerned with discussing those issues of the world in competition with non-religionists. Rather, such dialogue **should focus particularly on religious issues which deal with creed, worship, and social interaction in the various religions.**

**The fifth conclusion** is that dialogue between religionists and non-religionists – or secularists – would be more fruitful if focussed on finding solutions to the global religious and ethical challenges rather than maintaining a mere dialogue amongst themselves respectively. Since what is necessary is that two important questions be examined, questions which would realign the relationship between the two sides: the first regarding the **global status** of religion as opposed to the claim of its provincial status; the second regarding the **public status** of religion as opposed to the claim of its private status.

**The sixth conclusion** is that religious activities are not mere “acts of conscience” specific to the private individual, or that their effects are limited to, and do not extend beyond, the individual. Rather, they are actions that are empathic and have public effect, which encompass and affect societies as a whole; the effects of religious practice extend to others beyond the immediate agents.

**The seventh conclusion** is that rational discussion is not precluded from discussions of spiritual matters or comparative ethics. Rather, **the rationalism which applies thereto is broader than the rationalism applied to materialistic matters, and the ethic of the former is more firmly grounded than the ethic of the latter.**

**The eighth conclusion** is that **there is indeed a superiority of some religions over others in accordance with their capacity to preserve this broad reasonableness and this firmly grounded ethic, just as some philosophies and theories are superior to others in accordance**

with their degree of pure reason or the strength of their ethical principles.

**The ninth conclusion** is that **global peace cannot be achieved by mere non-confrontation between the religions.** We cannot hope for such a peace so long as the calculus of personal interests and the logic of force are those that guide and inform the relations between individuals and states – though I am inclined to believe that they will remain in force until the end of time.

**The tenth conclusion** is that enlisting the spirituality of religion for the purpose of expanding the domination of materialism is nothing less than **a war against religion to the same degree that it is a war upon man himself, and a war against the individual to the same degree that it is a war against the other.**





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