

TOWARDS A UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF A GLOBAL ETHIC: A CHRISTIAN COMMENT

by

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Leonard Swidler is undoubtedly right as also is his colleague Hans Kung--in thinking that the time is ripe to begin the world-wide process of formulating a basic global ethic; and we must be grateful to them for having taken the initiative embodied this draft. For we are all conscious today that our world has become a virtual communicational unity, that its nations and regions are increasingly economically interdependent, and that war is insanely destructive. The survival and flourishing of the human family requires at this moment in history the articulation of at least a basic ethical outlook, and if possible a set of ethical principles, on which all the major streams of human culture concur, and which can be used to influence their behavior. We need to uncover and cultivate the ground of human unity beneath the multiplicity of nations, cultures, social systems, religions and ideologies among which and between which conflicts

The difficulty in offering a distinctively Christian comment on Leonard Swidler's draft is that it is already in an important sense a Christian document. For since the European "Enlightenment" of the eighteenth century Western Christianity has been increasingly suffused with the individualistic, democratic, liberal, historically-minded, science-oriented outlook of the Enlightenment, an outlook that constitutes what can comprehensively be called the ethos of "modernity." Indeed Christianity, as a cultural influence, is identified in the minds of many Christians, particularly when they make comparisons with other religions, with these liberal ideals of modernity. From an historical point of view, this is paradoxical. For what has happened is that secular modernity has transformed the outlook of most of the Christian world, rather than that Christianity has out of its own distinctive religious resources introduced these modern liberal values into Western culture. Indeed during much the greater part of its history Christianity has been neither democratic, nor liberal, nor science-oriented, nor historically-minded or individualistic in the modern sense. In saying, then, that Leonard Swidler's is a Christian draft I merely mean that it comes out of contemporary Western Christianity and embodies the spirit of post-Enlightenment culture. Anyone reading it can readily identify its provenance, reflecting as it does the concerns and presuppositions of modernity. (Let me add at this point that the currently fashionable notion of "post-modernity" has been given such different meanings by different writers and schools of thought that its use would merely be confusing in the present context, and I recommend that we avoid it).

Christianity, as an historical-cultural movement, has through the centuries absorbed and been changed by a series of external cultural forces: neo-Platonism in the early centuries, then the revival of Greek learning and of the enquiring rational spirit in the Renaissance, later the Enlightenment and the impact of modern science, then Darwinism and also the historical study of ancient scriptures in the second half of the nineteenth century, and liberal secularization in the twentieth century. All these influences have as their present end-product the modern Western outlook that is roughly coterminous with the vaguely Christian culture of North America and Europe and some of their colonial extensions.

The fact that modernity developed first in the West, and has largely remade the social ethos of Christianity in its own image, is basic to our situation today; whilst the correlative fact that this modern ethos is linked to Christianity through the contingencies of history, rather than being intrinsically Christian in any exclusive sense, may be crucially relevant to the project of a global ethic.

For it may be that some at least of the same influences are at work throughout our increasingly unified world, transforming the other religious, and also officially anti-religious, cultures of the earth, so that the kind of ethic proposed in Leonard Swidler's draft may prove to be acceptable more or less universally.

But on the other hand this may prove to be only very partially the case. Some, but not all, of the influences that have gone into the formation of the Christian version of modernity are affecting the other traditions. And there may well be yet other influences upon them that have not affected Christianity. There may thus be significant variations of outlook within an increasingly "modern" global mind-set. And these variations may quite possibly affect the basic framework and structure of a global ethic and the presuppositions that are reflected in it.

For this reason this first draft, produced by Leonard Swidler (and likewise the basically similar draft produced by Hans Kung), must not stand as the one official draft which is to be amended, added to, and developed by contributions from the rest of the world. It is essential that as early in the process as possible other independent initial drafts be forthcoming from within the cultures of China, Africa, Russia, India, the Islamic world, the Buddhist world, the "primal" life-streams. Only then, with the comparison and interaction of these perhaps significantly different drafts, will the movement towards a genuinely global Declaration be able to proceed beyond its present initial state. At least as important, then, as the organizing of intensive discussion of our Western draft must be the eliciting of Asian, African, Pacific and other drafts.

To set this wider and more pluralistic process in motion obviously requires resources. Might UNESCO be the agent? or might an initiative be taken by religious leaders (the Pope, the Dalai Lama...), or by academics? Or might some major sponsor concerned with the larger welfare of the world be approached: the Aga Khan, or one of the major U.S. Foundations, or the Spanish Fundacion BBV...? Or several of these in collaboration? I can, alas, only ask but cannot answer these questions.

The West today is largely secular, with only a marginal religious influence in addition to that which has floated down through the culture. Much of the rest of the world is much more strongly religiously influenced. But in the West as well as elsewhere the main voice of moral consciousness, formulating and propagating whatever ethical principles we recognize, remains that of the religions. Their teachings thus constitute the natural starting point for the search for a global ethic. The recognition (which Leonard Swidler emphasizes in his Introduction) that all the major traditions teach a form of the "Golden Rule" of treating others as one would oneself wish to be treated, is thus enormously important. This will almost certainly become recognized globally as the basic principle of morality. For it seems to be a virtually universal human insight that to be a moral person is to regard others as having essentially the same value as oneself. The differences in ethical outlook then consist in different assumptions about who the "others" are: family, tribe, caste, nation, religious community, human species?

In his section IV Leonard Swidler formulates ethical principles which follow from the Golden Rule. His eight Basic Principles sound right to me, as one sharing his modern Western liberal outlook. But I should (as I am sure Leonard Swidler would also) like to see independent attempts from within the Chinese, Indian, African and other cultures to spell out the implications of the Golden Rule. It could be that these will all be broadly consonant with his draft. Or it could be that significant differences will emerge, which would then give rise to important dialogues. And, as Leonard Swidler says in his Introduction, a Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic "must be arrived at by consensus through dialogue."

Swidler's ten Middle Principles also sound right to me. For, once again, they reflect our modern Western cultural ideals. Do they also reflect a universal point of view, common to the peoples of all cultures? I do not

know. This is something that only a wider inter-cultural dialogue can establish. For the aim of a Universal Declaration must be to express an existing, or now forming, common outlook, not to impose that of one culture upon others. It may turn out that the existing common outlook does not at present go so far as some of Swidler's Middle Principles. Or it may be that it does; or again, that in the process of dialogue it might develop in that direction. Or it may be that some quite different principles will emerge.

I return in conclusion to my main point. In this first stage of the search for a global ethic, rather than getting the peoples of other cultures to debate our Western draft, agreeing or disagreeing with it as the only document on the table, we should say: "Here is the kind of draft that comes naturally to us in the industrialized West. What kind of draft comes naturally to you, and to you, and to you?" And then the next stage beyond this should be to bring a plurality of drafts together and see what comes out of the interaction between them.

I do not think that in any of this I am differing from what Leonard Swidler has in mind. I want particularly to stress, however, the need to move as soon as possible from a one-draft to a multi-draft situation. So long as we only have a modern Western draft there will be the danger of the whole project looking like an act of Western cultural imperialism. This has never been the intention. And the danger can be avoided by directing every effort to get people from within the other great cultural streams of human life to participate in the search from their own independent points of view.

It cannot count as a legitimate criticism that the search for a global ethic has originated in the West; for it had to originate somewhere! And the West probably contains more abundantly than elsewhere the practical resources required to launch and promote the process. But it would be a ground for legitimate criticism if the search remained concentrated around our Western contribution to it. The challenge is now to find ways of opening the discussion up on an equal basis within all the great traditions of the earth.