

# THE DRAFTING OF A GLOBAL ETHIC: A HINDU PERSPECTIVE

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by  
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The enterprise of formulating a declaration of an ethic which is universally recognized as reflecting the diverse "understandings of the ultimate meaning of life, and how to live accordingly" is challenging. I congratulate all who are accepting this challenge--and especially Leonard Swidler, who, after formulating such a document, always looks for contributions and critiques from diverse people, and then offers further reflection and clarification.

The "globe" is, and always has been, one and interconnected, although consciousness about this oneness and interconnectedness, for a large number of people, is rather recent. This "one" globe consists of diverse beings. It is a unit with diversity. Among the diverse beings of the globe, only humans think and believe in various "meanings of life, and live accordingly," as far as we know. In different parts of the globe there have been, and still are, different types of people. Although there are more resemblances in the thinking of people regionally, there are also diverse ways of thinking within these regions. Plurality is a characteristic of the globe. This characteristic has caused, and is still causing, many problems in the world. However, if in order to deal with the problems we eliminate diversity, we will impoverish the world in the same way as if we would allow the extinction of a specific species, such as the bald eagle. Therefore, when a document for a global ethic is formulated, there is a need for caution, and a concern for the preservation of diversity.

Looking at the history of humankind as a whole, as well as humans of different regions, many paradigm shifts in human consciousness can indeed be noted, and many able scholars have very aptly described them (Hans Küng, Ewert Cousins, Leonard Swidler). In the twenty-first century "global consciousness" is the prominent characteristic of the new paradigm of human consciousness which Cousins describes as ushering in a "Second Axial Period," and Swidler describes as the dawning of the "Age of Dialogue." From Cousin's description of the different "Axial Periods" it becomes evident that "global consciousness" cannot be the characteristic of any one region of the world. Just as in the "First Axial Period" the same consciousness of individualism emerged differently in various regions of the world--in China as Confucianism, in Greece as "Socratism," in India as *Atmavada*--in the same way in the "Second Axial Period" the same "global consciousness" is emerging differently in various regions of the world. For example, in the West as Christendom transformed by secularization and technology into Western Civilization; in the East as Zen, Neo-Vedanta and Neo-Confucianism. Otherwise, it would not be the "Second Axial Period." Likewise, what Leonard Swidler describes as the "Age of Dialogue" presupposes diversity, and thus the "global consciousness" which leads to dialogue, (sometimes it can be a result of dialogue) is a consciousness of diversity as well.

Leonard Swidler describes how Western Civilization emerged *via* many revolutions in understanding. Here, of particular importance is the role of the subject or knower in what is known. Swidler mentions in a footnote that the importance of the *perspective* of the knower in what is known was referred to by Indian thinkers two millennia ago, but these reflections were not of importance to the development of Western thought. However, the globe was physically interconnected in the past as it is in the present.

There had been interchanges in ancient times *via* conquests and trading--such as Alexander's conquest, and the silk route. Though of course it was not as instantaneous as it is now. If, however, we scrutinize the writings of the thinkers who were influential during the eighteenth-century "Enlightenment" in Europe, such as Voltaire, we can note that he was not only aware of Confucius, but was very appreciative of him. The world was connected all along! However, for the purpose of our discussion here, attributing credit or discredit to any one region of the world is not of importance, because all agree about the importance of diversity and enrichment-contribution of each by and for each other.

To emphasize perspectivalism again, what seems to be an "age of discovery and prosperity" from the perspective of Europe, appears to be an "age of demise and extinction" from the perspective of Native Americans. The secular scientific studies, as mentioned by Swidler, enable us to understand the dominated, the disenfranchised, the marginalized as well as the dominating, the powerful, and the central. The secular perspective thus also has its role to play. (Charles Long)

The religious perspectives likewise have their roles to play and are not to be subsumed under the secular perspective. It is under the predominance of secular thought, which transformed Christendom into Western Civilization, that many international institutions, such as the United Nations, have been organized and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) was formulated. This "Secular Humanism" was necessarily the foundation of that document. However, despite its legal status it could not alone attain the goal of peace and justice, although many groups, such as "Amnesty International" and others were empowered by the Declaration and organized a world-wide system of vigilance on the violations of human rights. Today most of the religions of the world do not have any legal power, but they still attract many persons by their invitation to the "power of transformation."

Yet, for many individuals and groups, a particular religion still provides a sense of identity. However, when the sense of identity from religious affiliation becomes colored by socio-political and economic conditions, and the relationship of dominance/subordination among individuals and groups, religions have and do become sources of disputes and violence. Just as secular thought cannot be neglected simply because it can, and at times did, generate absolute skepticism and cynicism and a sense of "anything goes," similarly the contributions of religions cannot be neglected simply because of their potential, sometimes realized, for sectarianism and violence.

The transformative power of religions can be noted in a very prominent way especially among the mystics of all the major world religions. The invitation to and experience of transcendence transform them into holy and holistic personalities. They perceive reality holistically and hence act with compassion. Thus, in the life of the mystics we note the virtues that the "Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic" tries to inculcate, viz., recognizing all humans and non-humans as valuable and relating to them with dignity. The mystics often also act with love. We have examples such as the stories of Gautama the Buddha giving some of his own flesh to a hungry hawk and St. Francis of Assisi talking and communing with "brother bird" and "sister fish." Of course, their (w)holistic consciousness seems to be different from the wholistic experience of astronauts when they look at the earth from their space crafts, although for some astronauts this vision of "globe" did lead to a transformation of "global consciousness."

The point is: "global" or expanded consciousness seems to be the key for a kind of human transformation which enables humans to recognize that self-love and love of others, well-being of each and well-being of all are inter-related. Thus, there is not any real conflict between the Declaration of Human Rights and the ethical precepts advocated by the different religions, although in the former the emphasis is on Rights and in the latter on Duties and Responsibilities. They complement each other. Unfortunately, the traditional religions, wherein the emphasis is on responsibilities, have often misconstrued self-expansion and renunciation into self-abnegation and asceticism. Consequently, religious people too often fall in the trap of restrained consciousness, rather than stride into the freedom of an expanded one.

When thinkers have attempted to base ethical behavior on rationality alone, they encountered problems that are difficult to resolve intellectually. That is why Kant had to write his *Critique Of Practical Reason* after writing the *Critique of Pure Reason* and insisted that ethical precepts are "categorical imperatives." Thus, he formulated the precept: "Act only on that principle which you can at the same time universalize"--which is quite similar to the "Golden Rule." Just as intellectuals have pointed out that there are hardly any principles of action which can be absolutely universalized without any regard for circumstances, similarly all principles of action *can* be universalized if particular circumstances are taken into consideration.

The same intellectual criticisms can be raised about the Golden Rule which Swidler proposes as a "Fundamental Rule of Global ethic." The different religions formulate their ethical precepts by way of their beliefs in transcendence. The important point to note, however, is that although the doctrines or beliefs about transcendence in the different religions vary, the ethical precepts are very similar. Swidler in his "Excursus on the Golden Rule" demonstrated this very aptly. Even concrete and specific rules such as non-killing or responsibility about life are present in all religions, although the rationale for them is different in the various religions. In Judaism "You shall not kill!" is God's command; in Buddhism it is essential for Nirvana. The problem is not that there is no common ethic among the different religions and ideologies, but that people do not follow the ethical precepts of their own religions and ideologies.

Religions, as pointed out by Swidler, are characterized by the four "C's". But they can also be looked at as ways of transformation from limited consciousness to expanded consciousness, or what are now called spiritualities. Many consider this aspect of religion to be the "core" of religion and "ethics" to be essential part of spiritual transformation. "Giving" is a common ethical precept in most religions. It may be hard to justify this precept intellectually, but once one "gives" because it is a "duty," one is then likely to experience the joy of giving and an expansion of consciousness. Many such experiences are reported by missionaries and service-oriented people. Eventually, one gives because of love and not out of a sense of duty or responsibility.

The different religions and ideologies have different perspectives regarding the ways of transformation, dependent on their belief systems. From the perspective of each, its own system is likely to appear to be the most adequate, and arguments or so-called empirical evidences can not settle the matter. When dialogue occurs and one is exposed to a different point of view than one's own, new insights may be generated which lead to shifting and arranging of data differently than when there is no exposure at all. Thus exposure to diversity leads to dynamism and vitality that keeps the religions and ideologies alive. When any religion or ideology tries to maintain itself by raising walls around it so that influences of the "other" cannot affect it, its demise is sure to occur. The collapse of the "Iron Curtain" and the Berlin Wall can be cited as examples. Each religion or ideology will survive if they are dynamic--and each will maintain its distinctiveness and not end in monolithic oneness.

What is distinctive about Hinduism is its ideology of unity in plurality. The Hinduism of the sixth century B.C.E. and the Hinduism of the twentieth century C.E. are very different because of its exposure to many religions and ideologies--however, the recognition of diversity and plurality still remains its characteristic mark. Of course, one cannot say that there are no sectarian Hindus. Among the different groups of Hindus themselves some worshipers of Vishnu make Shakti subordinate to Vishnu; similarly, some Shakti worshipers make Vishnu subordinate to Shakti. Further, many Hindus have an attitude of superiority regarding their own religion and subsume all other religions under their own way of thinking. However, Hindu mystics of an expanded consciousness displayed openness to all influences--for example, Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Moreover, according to the various forms of Hindu thought, ethical cultivation is essential in order to gain a proper insight into the ideologies that are presented in the religious texts.

The *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali can be considered a summary of Hindu spiritual exercise. This text outlines the seven steps of the spiritual exercises. Of them the first two are ethical culture. The first step, *yama*, means the observance of five virtues: non-violence, non-lying or truth, non-stealing, continence, non-dependence on other's charity or self-reliance. The second step, *niyama*, suggests: cleanliness of body and mind, contentment or not complaining, discipline, study, and surrender to God. All these precepts are in agreement with the Golden Rule and do not disagree with Swidler's proposed Declaration. Not-to-kill is of course respect for life and non-stealing respect for right to property. Not to lie is related with treating each other with dignity. Continence is respect for one's own self and others and not to accept charity is also dignity for one's self. The virtues suggested in the *niyama* are more for the individual's cultivation of strength of character that leads to the expansion of consciousness, and therefore do not violate the precepts suggested by Swidler, but simply go beyond them.

In Hindu society there are many violations of the dignity of humans--for example, the *dalits* or subjugated ones (Untouchables), oppressed women, *etc.* These violations are sometimes justified by some scriptures. However, the Hindu spiritual paths do not suggest blind adherence to texts, but a verification of them by *yukti*, or rationality, and *anubhuti*, or personal spiritual-intuitive experience. Many spiritual leaders, because of their transformation of consciousness, have decried the subjugation of any humans by other humans. Hindus, insofar as they believe in the possibility of the transformation of consciousness from narrowness to expansion, can join their voice to Hans Küng, Ewert Cousins and Leonard Swidler and celebrate ushering in of a "New Paradigm," the "Second Axial Period" and the "Age of Dialogue."