

# **EXPLANATORY REMARKS CONCERNING A "DECLARATION OF THE RELIGIONS FOR A GLOBAL ETHIC"**

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The Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago commissioned me to develop a draft of a "Declaration of the Religions for a Global Ethic." That was for me an extremely difficult task. However, after I was able to deal with the problems of such a Declaration throughout the entire summer semester (1992) in an interdisciplinary colloquium with participants from various religions and continents, I was in a position to produce an initial draft and then send it to various colleagues and friends for correction. This first draft received broad agreement from all those to whom it was sent. At the same time dozens of formal as well as material suggestions for correction were submitted, which I have now taken into account as carefully as possible in a second draft; the text has thereby gained in precision. I wish to extend my heartfelt thanks to those who have engaged themselves in this important project whether in the interdisciplinary colloquium or in collaboration from the beginning through correspondence.

I would here like briefly to lay out the principles which have guided me in this effort.

1. This should in the first place be a Declaration of the RELIGIONS, which could later be followed by a general Declaration (as for example within the framework of UNESCO).
2. In a "Declaration for a World Ethic" the focus cannot be on the JURIDICAL level of laws, codified rights and appealable paragraphs (e.g., Human Rights), or on the POLITICAL level of concrete suggested solutions (e.g., in reference to the debt crisis of the Third World), but rather only the ETHICAL level: the level of BINDING VALUES, IRREVOCABLE STANDARDS and INTERIOR FUNDAMENTAL ATTITUDES. Of course these three levels are related to each other.
3. There were suggestions to make the Declaration more "religious." However, new difficulties would result from this. If we, for example, were to speak "in the name of God," we would a priori exclude the Buddhists. Moreover, there is no consensus on a definition of what "religion" is. Nevertheless, I have clearly addressed the dimension of transcendence without forcing the compliance of the non-religious who this Declaration should include.
4. Conversely there were suggestions to make the Declaration less "religious." However, if the religions in essence merely repeat statements from the United Nations Human Rights Declaration, such a Declaration becomes superfluous; an ethic is more than rights. Of course our Declaration of a Global Ethic can be an ethical support for the Declaration of Human Rights of the UN. In fact, it is thoroughly desirable that either UNESCO or the UN as soon as possible likewise issue a Declaration of a Global Ethic.
5. Such a Declaration must be CAPABLE OF PRODUCING A CONSENSUS. Hence, statements must be avoided which a priori would be rejected by one of the great religions, and as a consequence disputed moral questions (like abortion or euthanasia) had to be excluded.
6. This must be a Declaration which is formulated in language which is GENERALLY UNDERSTANDABLE, which avoids technical arguments and jargon, and likewise is translatable into other languages. It seemed to me to be more understandable to begin in general with negative definitions and then to move to positive statements.

This Declaration was signed by most of the nearly two hundred "delegates" of the world's religions who attended the "Parliament of the World's Religions" held on the centenary of the first "World Parliament of Religions" in Chicago in 1893. The 1993 "Parliament of the World's Religions" (attended by 6,500 persons) was held in Chicago August 28 - September 4, 1993, and this Declaration was solemnly proclaimed on September 4, 1993.

## **THE PARLIAMENT OF THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS DECLARATION TOWARD A GLOBAL ETHIC**

### **The Principles of a Global Ethic**

Our world is experiencing a fundamental crisis: a crisis in global economy, global ecology, and global politics. The lack of a grand vision, the tangle of unresolved problems, political paralysis, mediocre political leadership with little insight or foresight, and in general too little sense for the commonweal are seen everywhere. Too many old answers to new challenges.

Hundreds of millions of human beings on our planet increasingly suffer from unemployment, poverty, hunger, and the destruction of their families. Hope for a lasting peace among nations slips away from us. There are tensions between the sexes and generations. Children die, kill, and are killed. More and more countries are shaken by corruption in politics and business. It is increasingly difficult to live together peacefully in our cities because of social, racial, and ethnic conflicts, the abuse of drugs, organized crime, and even anarchy. Even neighbors often live in fear of one another. Our planet continues to be ruthlessly plundered. A collapse of the ecosystem threatens us.

Time and again we see leaders and members of religions incite aggression, fanaticism, hate, and xenophobia - even inspire and legitimate violent and bloody conflicts. Religion often is misused for purely power-political goals, including war. We are filled with disgust.

We condemn these blights and declare that they need not be. An ethic already exists within the religious teachings of the world which can counter the global distress. Of course this ethic provides no direct solution for all the immense problems of the world, but it does supply the moral foundation for a better individual and global order: a vision which can lead women and men away from despair, and society away from chaos.

We are persons who have committed ourselves to the precepts and practices of the world's religions. We confirm that there is already a consensus among the religions which can be the basis for a global ethic - a minimal fundamental consensus concerning binding values irrevocable standards, and fundamental moral attitudes.

### **I. No Better Global Order Without a Global Ethic**

We men and women of various religions and regions of this earth address here all people, religious and non-religious, for we share the following convictions:

- that we all have a responsibility for a better global order;
- that involvement for the sake of human rights, freedom, justice, peace and the preservation of the earth is reasonable and necessary; that our different religious and cultural traditions must not prevent our common involvement in opposing all forms of inhumanity and working for greater humaneness;
- that the principles expressed in this Declaration can be affirmed by all humans with ethical convictions, religiously grounded or not.

that we as religious women and men who base our lives on an Ultimate Reality and draw spiritual power and hope therefrom in trust, in prayer or meditation, in word or silence have, however, a very special responsibility for the welfare of all humanity.

After two world wars, the collapse of fascism, nazism, communism and colonialism and the end of the cold war, humanity has entered a new phase of its history. Humanity today possesses sufficient economic, cultural and spiritual resources to introduce a better global order. But new ethnic, national, social and religious tensions threaten the peaceful building of a better world. Our time has experienced greater technological progress than ever existed before, and yet we are faced with the fact that world-wide poverty, hunger, death of children, unemployment, misery and the destruction of nature have not abated but rather to some extent increased. Many peoples are threatened with economic ruin, social disarray, political marginalization and national collapse.

In such a critical situation humanity needs not only political programs and actions, but also a vision of a peaceful living together of peoples, ethnic and ethical groupings, and religions; it needs hopes, goals, ideals, standards. But these have slipped from the hands of people all over the world. Do not the religions, however, despite their frequent historical failures, bear a responsibility precisely to demonstrate that such hopes, ideals and standards can be grounded, guarded and lived? This is especially true in the modern state: Precisely because it guarantees freedom of conscience and religion it needs binding values, convictions and norms which are valid for all humans regardless of their social origin, skin color, language or religion.

We are convinced of the fundamental unity of the human family. Therefore, we recall to mind the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. What it formally proclaimed on the level of rights we wish to confirm and deepen here from the perspective of an ethic: The full realization of the intrinsic dignity of the human person, of inalienable freedom, of the equality in principle of all humans, and the necessary solidarity of all humans with each other.

On the basis of personal life experiences and the burdensome history of our planet we have learned

that a better global order cannot be created or, indeed, enforced with laws, prescriptions and conventions alone;  
that the realization of justice in our societies depends on the insight and readiness to act justly;  
that action in favor of rights presumes a consciousness of duty, and that therefore both the head and heart of women and men must be addressed;  
that rights without morality cannot long endure, and that there will be no better global order without a global ethic.

By a global ethic we do not mean a single unified religion beyond all existing religions, and certainly not the domination of one religion over all others. By global ethic we mean a fundamental consensus on binding values, unconditional standards and personal attitudes. Without such a basic consensus in ethic, every community sooner or later will be threatened by chaos or dictatorship.

## **II. A Fundamental Demand: Every Human Being Must Be Treated Humanely**

However, because we all are fallible men and women with limitations and defects, and because we are aware of the reality of evil, we feel compelled, for the sake of human welfare, to express in this Declaration our convictions about what the fundamental elements of a global ethic should be -- for individuals as well as for communities and organizations, for states as well as for religions themselves. For we trust that our often millennia-old religious and ethical traditions contain sufficient elements of an

ethic which are convincing to and practicable for all women and men of good will, religious and non-religious, and which can thus form a common moral foundation for a humane life together on our earth.

At the same time we are aware that our various religions and ethical traditions often offer very different bases for what is helpful and what is unhelpful for men and women, what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil. We do not wish to gloss over or ignore the serious differences among the individual religions. However, they should not hinder us from proclaiming publicly those things which we already hold in common now, to which we jointly feel obliged, each on the basis of our own religious or ethical grounds.

We are conscious that religions cannot solve the economic, political and social problems of this earth. However, they can indeed provide what obviously cannot be attained by economic plans, political programs or legal regulations alone: They can effect a change in the inner orientation, the whole mentality, the "hearts," of people and move them to a "conversion" from a false path to a new orientation for life. Religions, however, are able to provide people a horizon of meaning for their lives, ultimate standards and a spiritual home. Of course religions can act credibly only when they eliminate those conflicts which spring from the religions themselves and dismantle mutual hostile images and prejudices, fear and mistrust.

We all know that now as before all over the world women and men are treated inhumanely: They are robbed of their freedom and their opportunities; their human rights are trampled under foot; their human dignity is disregarded. But might does not make right! In the face of all inhumanity our religions and ethical convictions demand that every human being must be treated humanely!

That means that every human being -- without distinction of sex, age, race, skin color, language, religion, political view, or national or social origin -- possesses an inalienable and untouchable dignity. And everyone, individuals as well as the state, is therefore obliged to honor this dignity and guarantee its effective protection. Humans must always be the subjects of rights, must be ends, never mere means, never objects of commercialization and industrialization in economics, politics and media, in research institutes and industrial undertakings. Also in our age no human being, no social class, no influential interest group, no power cartel and likewise no state stands "beyond good and evil." No, all men and women, as beings with reason and conscience, are obliged to behave in a genuinely human, not inhuman, fashion, to do good and avoid evil!

To clarify what this means concretely is the intention of our Declaration. We wish to recall that ethical norms should be not bonds and chains but helps and supports for humans so that they may always find and realize anew their life's direction, values, orientation and meaning.

For an authentically human attitude we especially call to mind that Golden Rule which is found and has been maintained in many religions and ethical traditions for thousands of years: What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others. Or positively: What you wish done to yourself, do to others! This should be the irrevocable, unconditional norm for all areas of life, for family and communities, for races, nations and religions. Self-determination and self-realization are thoroughly legitimate -- so long as they are not separated from human self-responsibility and global-responsibility, from responsibility for fellow humans and nature. Every form of egoism, however, every self-seeking, whether individual or collective, whether in the form of class thinking, racism, nationalism or sexism, is to be rejected. For these prevent humans from being authentically human.

The Golden Rule implies very concrete standards to which we humans should and wish to hold firm when they concern the welfare of either individuals or humanity as a whole. There are above all four ancient guidelines for human behavior which are found in most of the religions of this world. They should be called to mind with a view to a better world order.

### **III. Four Irrevocable Directives**

#### **1. Toward a Culture of Non-violence and Respect for Life**

a) Numberless women and men of all regions and religions strive to lead a life that is not determined by egoism but by commitment to their fellow humans and the world around them. And yet there exists in today's world endless hatred, envy, jealousy and violence not only between individuals but also between social and ethnic groups, between classes, races, nations and religions. The tendency toward the use of violence and organized crime, equipped with new technical possibilities, has reached global proportions. Many places are still ruled by terror, and large as well as small dictators oppress their own people. Even in some democracies prisoners are tortured, men and women are mutilated, hostages killed.

b) But in the great ancient religious and ethical traditions of humankind we find the teaching: You shall not kill! Or in positive terms: Have respect for life! Concretely that means that no one has the right to torture, injure, and certainly not to kill, any other human being. And no people, no race, no religion has the right to hate, to discriminate, and certainly not to exile or to liquidate a "foreign" minority which is different in behavior, different in belief.

c) Therefore young people should learn already at home and in school that violence may not be a means of settling differences with others. Only thus can a culture of non-violence be created. All people have a right to life, bodily integrity and the development of personality insofar as they do not injure the rights of others. Of course wherever there are humans there will be conflicts. Such conflicts, however, are to be resolved without violence. This is true for states as well as for individuals, for political power-holders should always commit themselves first of all to non-violent solutions within the framework of an international order of peace -- which itself has need of protection and defense against perpetrators of violence. Armament is a mistaken path; disarmament is a commandment of the hour. There is no survival for humanity without peace!

A human person is infinitely precious and must be unconditionally protected. But likewise the lives of animals and plants which inhabit this planet with us deserve protection, preservation and care. As human beings we also have responsibility for the air, water and soil precisely with a view to future generations. The dominance of humanity over nature and the cosmos is not to be propagated, but rather living in harmony with nature and the cosmos is to be cultivated. We speak for a respect for life, for all life.

d) To be authentically human in the spirit of our great religions and ethical traditions means that in public as well as private life we must not be ruthless and brutal but rather concerned for others and ready to help. Every people, every race, every religion must show tolerance, respect, indeed, high appreciation for every other. Minorities -- whether they be racial, ethnic or religious -- need our protection and our support.

#### **2. Toward a Culture of Solidarity and a Just Economic Order**

a) Numberless humans in all regions and religions strive even today to live a life in solidarity with one another and a life in work and authentic fulfillment of their vocation. Nevertheless there is in today's world endless hunger, deficiency and need for which not only individuals but even more unjust structures bear responsibility. Millions of men and women are without work, millions are exploited, are forced to the edge of society with possibilities for the future destroyed by poorly paid work. In many lands the gap between the poor and the rich, between the powerful and the powerless is monstrous. In a world in which state socialism as well as profit capitalism have hollowed out many ethical and spiritual values through a purely economic-political view of things, a greed for unlimited profit and a grasping for plunder without end could spread, as well as a materialistic mentality of claims which steadily

demands more of the state without obliging oneself to contribute more. The cancerous social evil of corruption has grown in the developing as well as the developed countries.

b) However, in the great ancient religious and ethical traditions of humankind we find the teaching: You shall not steal! Or in positive terms: Deal honestly! And, in fact, no humans have the right to rob or dispossess -- in any manner -- other humans or the commonweal. Conversely, no humans have the right to use their possessions without concern for the needs of society. Where extreme poverty reigns, theft will time and again occur for the sake of survival, if indeed complete helplessness and overwhelming despair have not set in. And where power and wealth is accumulated ruthlessly, feelings of envy, resentment, and yes, deadly hate inevitably will well up in the disadvantaged. This leads all too easily to a diabolic circle of violence and counter-violence. There is no global peace without a global order in justice!

c) Therefore young people should learn already at home and in school that property, be it ever so small, carries with it an obligation and that its use should at the same time serve the commonweal. Only thus can a just economic order be built up. But if the plight of the poorest billions of humans, particularly women and children, is to be improved, the structures of the world economy must be fundamentally altered. Individual good deeds and assistance projects, indispensable as they are, are not sufficient. The participation of all states and the authority of international organizations are needed to arrive at a just arrangement.

Certainly conflicts of interest are unavoidable, and even the developing nations have need of a national searching of conscience. Yet a solution for the debt crisis and the poverty of the second and third worlds which can be supported by all sides must be sought. In any case, in the developed countries a distinction must be made between a justified and an unjustified consumerism, between a socially beneficial and a non-beneficial use of property, between a reasonable and an unreasonable use of natural resources, between a profit-only and a socially beneficial and ecologically oriented market economy. It is universally valid: Wherever those ruling threaten to repress those ruled, institutions threaten persons, might oppresses right, resistance -- whenever possible, non-violent -- is in place.

d) To be authentically human in the spirit of our great religions and ethical traditions in today's world means the following:

Instead of misusing economic and political power in ruthless battles for domination, we must utilize them for service to humanity: In a spirit of compassion with those who suffer and with special care for the poor, handicapped, aged, refugees, the lonely.

Instead of thinking only of power and unlimited power-politics in the unavoidable competitive struggles, a mutual respect, a reasonable balance of interests, an attempt at mediation and consideration should prevail.

Instead of an unquenchable greed for money, prestige and consumption, once again a sense of moderation and modesty should reign! For in greed humans lose their "soul," their inner freedom, and thus that which makes them human.

### **3. Toward a Culture of Tolerance and a Life in Truthfulness**

a) Numberless humans of all regions and religions strive even in our day to live a life of honesty and truthfulness. And yet there exist in the world today endless lies and deceit, swindling and hypocrisy, ideology and demagoguery:

Politicians and business people who use lies as a way to success;  
mass media which spread ideological propaganda instead of accurate reporting, disinformation instead of information;

scientists and researchers who give themselves over to morally questionable ideological or political programs or to economic interest groups, and who attempt to justify research and experiments which violate fundamental ethical values;  
representatives of religions who dismiss members of other religions as of little value and who preach fanaticism and intolerance instead of respect, understanding and tolerance.

b) However, in the great ancient religious and ethical traditions of humankind we find the teaching: You shall not lie! Or in positive terms: Speak the truth! In fact, no woman or man, no institution, no state or church or religious community has the right to speak untruth to other humans. This is especially true for:

The **mass media**, to whom the right of freedom of the press and freedom of reporting for the sake of truth is assured and to whom the office of guardian is thus granted: They do not stand above morality, but remain duty bound to human dignity, human rights and fundamental values; they are duty bound to objectivity, fairness and the preservation of personal dignity and have no right to intrude into the private human sphere, to manipulate public opinion, or distort reality.

**Artists and scientists**, to whom artistic and academic freedom is assured: They are not dispensed from general ethical standards and must serve the truth in sincerity.

**Politicians** who, if they lie in the faces of their people, have frittered away their credibility and do not deserve to be reelected.

Finally, **representatives of religion**: When they stir up prejudice, hatred and enmity towards those of different belief they deserve no adherents.

c) Therefore young people should learn already at home and in school to think, speak and act in truthfulness. All humans have a right to the truth. They have a right to necessary information and education in order to be able to make decisions that will be formative for their lives. Without an ethical fundamental orientation they will hardly be able to distinguish the important from the unimportant in the daily flood of information today. Ethical standards will help them to discern when facts are twisted, interests are veiled, tendencies are played up and opinions absolutized.

d) To be authentically human in the spirit of our great religions and ethical traditions in today's world means the following:

Instead of dishonesty, dissembling and opportunistic adaptation to life, cultivate the spirit of truthfulness also in the daily relationships between fellow humans;  
instead of spreading ideological or partisan half-truths, seek the truth ever anew in incorruptible sincerity; instead of confusing freedom with arbitrariness and pluralism with indifference, hold truth high;  
instead of chasing after opportunism, serve in trustworthiness and constancy the truth once found.

#### **4. Toward a Culture of Equal Rights, and Partnership Between Men and Women**

a) Numberless humans of all regions and religions strive to live their lives in the spirit of partnership between man and woman, of responsible action in the area of love, sexuality and family. Nevertheless, all over the world there are condemnable forms of patriarchy, of domination of one sex over the other, of exploitation of women, of sexual misuse of children as well as forced prostitution. The social differences on this earth not infrequently lead to the taking up of prostitution as a means of survival, particularly by women of less developed countries.

b) However, in the great ancient religious and ethical traditions of humankind we find the teaching: You shall not commit sexual immorality! Or in positive terms: Respect and love one another! Concretely that means: No one has the right to degrade others to mere sex objects, to lead them to or hold them in sexual dependency. Sexual exploitation is to be condemned as one of the worst forms of human degradation. Wherever -- even in

the name of a religious conviction -- the domination of one sex over the other is preached and sexual exploitation is tolerated, wherever prostitution is fostered or children are misused, there resistance is commanded.

c) Therefore young women and men should learn already at home and in school that sexuality is fundamentally not a negative-destructive or exploitative but a creative force. Its function as a life-affirming shaper of community can be brought to bear all the more as it is lived out with responsibility for one's own happiness and that of one's partner. The relationship between men and women does indeed have a sexual dimension, but human fulfillment is not identical with sexual happiness. Sexuality should be an expression and reinforcement of a love relationship lived as partners. Conversely, however, some religious traditions know the ideal of a voluntary renunciation of the full use of sexuality; this renunciation can also be an expression of identity and meaningful fulfillment.

The socially institutionalized form of marriage, which despite all its cultural and religious variety is characterized by love, loyalty and permanence, aims at, and should guarantee, security and mutual support to the husband, wife and children, and secure their rights. It is in marriage that the relationship between a woman and a man should be characterized not by a patronizing behavior or exploitation, but by love, partnership and trustworthiness. All lands and cultures should develop economic and social relationships which will make possible marriage and family worthy of human beings, especially for older people. Parents should not exploit children, nor children parents; rather their relationship should reflect mutual respect, appreciation and concern.

d) To be authentically human in the spirit of our great religious and ethical traditions in today's world means the following:

Instead of patriarchal domination or degradation, which are the expression of violence and engender counter-violence, mutual respect, partnership, understanding and tolerance;  
instead of any form of sexual possessive lust or sexual misuse, mutual concern, tolerance, readiness for reconciliation, love. Only what has already been lived on the level of personal and familial relationships can be practiced on the level of nations and religions.

#### **IV. A Transformation of Consciousness**

All historical experience demonstrates the following: Our earth cannot be changed unless in the not too distant future an alteration in the consciousness of individuals is achieved. This has already been seen in areas such as war and peace or economy and ecology. And it is precisely for this alteration in inner orientation, in the entire mentality, in the "heart," that the religions bear responsibility in a special way. Here we remain aware, however, that a universal consensus on many disputed individual ethical questions (from bio- and sexual ethics through mass media and scientific ethics to economic and political ethics) will be difficult to attain. Nevertheless, even for many questions still disputed, differentiated solutions should be attainable in the spirit of the fundamental principles jointly developed here.

In many areas of life a new consciousness of ethical responsibility has already arisen. Therefore, we would be especially pleased if as many as possible national or international professional organizations, such as those for physicians, scientists, business people, journalists, and politicians, would compose up to date codes of ethics.

Above all, we would welcome it if individual religions also would formulate their very specific ethic: What they on the basis of their faith tradition have to say, for example, about the meaning of life and death, the enduring of suffering and the forgiveness of guilt, about selfless sacrifice and the necessity of renunciation, compassion and joy. All these will be compatible with a Global Ethic, indeed can deepen it, make it more specific and concrete.

We are convinced that the new global order will be a better one only in a socially-beneficial and pluralist, partner-sharing and peace-fostering, nature-friendly and ecumenical globe. Therefore on the basis of our

religious convictions we commit ourselves to a common Global Ethic and call upon all women and men of good will to make this Declaration their own.

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1 Not ethics, which implies rather great detail, but ethic in the singular, *i.e.*, the fundamental attitude toward good and evil, and the principles to put it into action.