

The History and Essence of the Global Ethic

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Dear Symposium Participants,

in my capacity as the Secretary General of the Global Ethic Foundation, I cordially welcome you to our Symposium. I am both pleased and grateful that we have been able to organize this Symposium jointly with the Berkley Center of Georgetown University, and I would like to take this opportunity of thanking everyone who has helped to make this Symposium possible: first of all Thomas Banchoff and Bradley Shingleton. I would especially like to thank all those who are contributing as presenters and co-presenters, and I hope we will enjoy some interesting and fruitful debates.

The topic which I will talk about in the next few minutes is called "The Essence and History of the Global Ethic". In order to understand the origins and aims of the Global Ethic idea we need to go back well over twenty years: in fact to the late Nineteen-Eighties, to that period of world-historical change and upheaval in Europe. It was hoped that the fall of the Berlin Wall, which brought the end of the Cold War, would herald a new era in international relations. Opening up the frontiers between East and West offered the formerly divided Europe a world-historical opportunity. Hundreds of millions of people hoped for a period of peace, stability and a flourishing

economic environment, a new era of peaceful exchange of ideas and human encounter.

At that time, no one could have believed that just over ten years later, following the horrific terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, the world would enter a new phase of global confrontation culminating in two wars with thousands of victims. A confrontation which appeared to have cultural and religious causes, although as we now know, its actual roots lie in politics based on power and the protection of interests. And many people are afraid that these ambiguous wars helped spreading religious terror instead of defeating it.

However, in the Nineteen-Eighties, when the Global Ethic idea was first raised, for many scholars the idea that religion could constitute a political factor as well as the concept of religion as a dimension of statecraft was still relatively new. Only a few scholars of political sciences approached such questions, and for most religious scientists and theologians, if they considered such matters at all, inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue had at best merely a peripheral political dimension.

Hans Küng, the founder and President of the Global Ethic Foundation, was one of those exceptions. He had been concerned for many years with the analysis of the paradigm shift from Modernity to Post-Modernity and with its consequences for politics, religion and society.

Hans Küng's analysis, presented in his booklet "Global Responsibility. In Search of a New World Ethic" in 1990, culminated in the conviction that the increasingly

globalised human race will only survive in the long term if, within this world, I quote “there is no longer any room in it for spheres of differing, contradictory and even antagonistic ethics”. End of quotation. Hans Kueng was convinced that this world does not need a uniform ideology, or a uniform religion, but, given all the differences between races, nations and cultures, it needs a few connective and binding values, standards and attitudes: Our globalised world needs a Global Ethic!

The decisive factor is that we do not need to invent or reinvent this Global Ethic! Because for thousands of years, humanity’s major religious and humanist traditions have been urging people to apply elementary ethical principles and standards: the very elementary principles of humanity and reciprocity (the famous “Golden Rule” of doing unto others as you would be done by), and basic values like non-violence, fairness, truth and protection of sexuality.

And it was a powerful endorsement of the Global Ethic idea that the Chicago Parliament of the World’s Religions in 1993 adopted a “Declaration toward a Global Ethic”, which formulated these principles and values as the core of a joint Global Ethic. Today, in our current world situation, such a document would scarcely be possible any more, and for this reason many quite rightly call the Chicago Declaration a milestone in the history of the interfaith movement.

Four years later, in 1997, the Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities, based on the Chicago Declaration and proposed by the InterAction Council of former heads of states showed the interdependence of Ethics and Rights, especially of Global Ethic and Human Rights. We will hear more about this from Prof. Walter Kaelin.

Hans Küng's emphasis on the ethical similarities between religions and cultures and their consequences for inter-religious dialogue as well as for politics was at the time new and challenging to many people. With his slogan "No Peace Among Nations without Peace Among the Religions" – which he used for the first time in 1984! – he opposed those who unilaterally emphasize the potential for conflict represented by religions.

First and foremost was Samuel Huntington with his theory of the unavoidable clash of civilizations, who had offered many people what they saw as plausible patterns of interpretation, following the 2001 September attacks. Whereas Huntington evidently knew little about complex historical interconnections of religions and cultures, about fluid transitions, mutual enrichment, and peaceful co-existence, Hans Küng emphasized the potential for peace that religion offers, along with understanding and dialogue, despite all the well known tensions and conflicts.

The Global Ethic idea is based on the conviction that people of different religions and cultures should not only focus on what divides them, but on what they have in common. We especially need to learn that as far as values and ethic is concerned, we are united by far more than we often believe possible. And these common values are fundamentally important, not only for the life of individuals and families, but for all areas of our modern society: education, the economy, national and international politics, law and culture as a whole.

This is why the Global Ethic project is not an explicitly religious project, as some believe, but is a generally ethical project. Our society's fundamental values cannot and should not have only a religious basis, but also a philosophical and secular basis. Thus a global ethic can be shared by religious and non-religious people alike, so that secular humanists and agnostics can identify with it in the same way as religious believers.

And the Global Ethic idea is not, as some of its critics claimed, a Western invention, which is to be imposed on the rest of the world in a colonialist fashion. The Global Ethic idea is not an invention at all! It is our common ethical heritage, which draws on all the world's leading religious and humanistic traditions.

For ever since the emergence of mankind, people had to learn to be truly humane. This is why humans developed values and ethical principles, as a basis for successful coexistence, for the protection of life, property, honour and sexuality. And this took place worldwide and in all cultures, despite the fact that throughout history, humans have and will continue to transgress them.

Our Symposium will debate the extent to which law and politics need the motivation and support of ethic. And because we are not merely examining these questions in a national but in a global context, we also have to ask for an ethic that can be accepted globally by people of all cultures. But the question of a Global Ethic as a basis of law and politics is far from an academic luxury. In fact it is directed towards the center, the principles and requirements of our society, not only here in the USA, but also in

Europe and elsewhere. In his basic paper, Hans Küng had a great deal to say about this, and in the next two days we will hear even more about it and will debate it.

The Global Ethic idea is not a utopia. It is a vision, based on the conviction that the commitment to respect and understanding between cultures and the commitment to ethical standards in politics, economy and society is a political necessity. Above all, it is a realistic vision, which is already being put into practice in many different ways. One example among others is the work of our Global Ethic Foundation.

In Tübingen, we have been researching and working on the topic of Global Ethic for over twenty years. Our Foundation has been established in 1995, to this day with partner organizations in Switzerland, Austria, Czech Republic, Mexico, Columbia, Brazil and China – unfortunately not in the USA! Our Foundation is doing basic scientific work on Global Ethic and it is disseminating and conveying this idea. And by its practical work, the Foundation is seeking to incorporate the Global Ethic idea into the social and political reality in a variety of ways and at very many different levels. For details of our work you may have a look at our website: www.global-ethic.org.

Our work is based on interfaith and philosophical research, which we have practiced from the outset, and continue to practice, with academics from a whole range of disciplines and from the world's major religions.

But right from the outset, tackling the challenges of our modern society and our modern world were just as essential to our work on Global Ethic. Today, in 2011,

many people are bound to be aware that many challenges and problems associated with ecology, politics, economics and society at all have an ethical dimension. But twenty years ago, such ideas were still new to many, so that books such as “Global Responsibility” in 1990 or “A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics” six years later, had something of a pioneering character.

So it was not by a coincidence that Hans Küng was invited by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in 2001 to join the Group of 21 Eminent Persons who were asked to discuss the foundations for a new paradigm of international relations for the 21st Century. The proposal drawn up by the group for a future model of coexistence between nations and cultures was finally published under the title “Crossing the Divide”. However, its potential has so far scarcely been exploited, and tomorrow we will discuss this question of such a “new paradigm” again.

Over the years, the work of our Foundation has gained new focus more or less organically. I have already mentioned interfaith dialogue and the fields of law and politics. The field of education, ideally at pre-school level and subsequently at school, is another important field of our work. Children should learn as early as possible to treat one another with esteem and respect, and to find ways of good and peaceful coexistence. Such coexistence needs to be learned and constantly practiced. Key requirements are knowledge and awareness of one another, not only of our different religions and cultures, but also of our common values, their meaning in our own lives, and finally practicing them on a day-to-day basis.

Over the years, we have developed a whole range of educational media and tools, which I cannot enumerate in detail here. Let me just mention our comprehensive multimedia project “Tracing the Way”, with its seven films dealing with the world’s major cultures and their ethos. Building on this, we have our exhibition on world religions and global ethic, which is available in a number of languages and is on show in many countries around the world. It was also displayed here in Washington at the IMF, together with the presentation of our films, and at the UN-Headquarter in New York. I would finally mention our online learning platform “A Global Ethic now!”, which people around the world can use to find out about all the different aspects of the topic of global ethic.

Finally, please let me mention another politically significant key topic of our work: the global economy. The global financial crises of the past 15 years and the repeated occurrence of new scandals on Wall Street and in the corporate world demonstrate that we not only require political and legal rules in order to improve the configuration of the global economy. We also need an awareness of the ethical dimensions of these problems. And this ethical dimension relates not only to structures and institutions, but also to the individual decision-makers and players and their own personal attitude, their own ethical convictions, their sense for responsibility.

Hans Küng has dealt with these topics already fourteen years ago in his book “A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics”, and facing up to economic decision-makers and actors has been a constant component of the work of our Foundation. And an expert group of our Foundation has drafted a “Manifesto for a Global

Economic Ethic” that was introduced to the public in Fall 2009 in New York, Beijing, Basel and Melbourne.

And a brandnew development is the establishing of a Global Ethic Institute at Tübingen University. A German businessman has financed this institute: it will tackle first and foremost the questions associated with a Global Economic Ethic. But in the long term it will cover the whole range of topics on which we are working in the Global Ethic Fondation.

So ends, my dear listeners, this brief discourse on “The History and Essence of the Global Ethic”.

In 2003, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan gave the third “Global Ethic Lecture” at Tübingen University. Nine such renowned lectures by leading international figures have been given in Tübingen to date. At the time, in 2003, the contentious Iraq War had begun, and against the background of those events, Kofi Annan asked the question “Do we still have universal values?”. And he came to the following conclusion:

“Yes, we do, but we should not take them for granted.

They need to be carefully thought through.

They need to be defended.

They need to be strengthened.

And we need to find within ourselves the will to live by the values we proclaim – in our private lives, in our local and national societies, and in the world.”

Thank you very much.