

# The Imperative of A Global Ethic in A Global Society

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## Abstract

This paper will explore a core ethical consensus that is found, shared and accepted in world's religious teachings in response to core universal problems; growing injustice, inequality, poverty and difficulty that are prevalent in all countries and cultures.

To achieve ethical consensus that would offer a solid foundation for 'A Global Ethic' is a big challenge. This common human ethic has to tolerate and understand differences, to transcend religious and cultural conflicts and most importantly to alleviate the sufferings of all mankind in our global society.

Mankind's global society is in need of a global ethic. Hans Kung, a renowned Catholic theologian has confirmed that this world only has a chance of survival if it is endowed with a common, universal standard of values, ideals and goals that serve as an adhesive that holds a global society together.

**Keyword:** Global Ethics, Society, Value

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## The Imperative of A Global Ethic in A Global Society Fundamental Problems

An **ethical consensus** – an agreement on particular values, criteria, attitudes – as a basis for the world society that is coming into being: is that not a great, beautiful illusion? In view of the differences which have always existed between nations, cultures and religions; in view of the current tendencies and trends towards cultural, linguistic and religious self-assertion ..., is it possible to envisage any ethical consensus at all, let alone in global dimensions? However, one can also argue in the opposite direction: precisely **in view of this oppressive situation, a basic ethical consensus** is necessary.<sup>1</sup>

From the excerpt above, one concern that weighs heavily on many ethicists, hearts is that – we all live in an increasingly multi religious and multicultural society which the diversity of cultural norms and religious values makes the prospect of arriving at an ethical consensus more than remote. For an ethos to become universally accepted, it has to somehow tolerate and understand differences in beliefs and customs, to embrace common ethical principles found in most of the world's religions in order to transcend religious and cultural conflicts; and most significantly, this common basic human ethic has to serve as a cement that holds a global society together.

As our global society advances into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the world is experiencing a pace of technological culture and globalization. Every day brings further not only the evidence of socio-economic advancement, but also the unacceptable divide in our world ... millions living in extreme poverty and enduring conflict. In an ever more interdependent world, global society must be guided by: “a global ethic based on a shared ethical values that transcend religious beliefs and narrow definitions of national interests” in order to strengthen the moral health of the humankind.

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<sup>1</sup> Kung, Hans. *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1998), p. 91.

Therefore, the challenge of this paper is – to seek a common basic human ethic which is acceptable to all in the world of differences. *As achieving ethical consensus that would offer a palatable foundation for a global ethic is a major challenge, it will remain meaningless at the abstract level unless the common values shared by the world's religion were unpacked and explored in a practical dimension of human's life.* It is to say that – if a global ethic finds a compatibility with the basic value system of the world's religions, it can be suggested that the shared ethical values could be virtually employed and the implementation would be firmly secured.

Fortunately, Hans Kung, Swiss theologian and the director of the Ecumenical Institute at the university of Tübingen was the first to introduce us to the concept of a global ethic by spending his lifelong commitment to bringing people of different spiritual traditions and backgrounds together around the common values that unite us as one human family. Before we embark on moral reflection for our global society, it would be good if we first go through a brief review of a global ethic and its significant messages.

## What is A Global Ethic ?

### 1. A common basic human ethic.

Aware of the world's agony, Hans Kung was the first to introduce us to the concept of a global ethic. He drafted the 5,000- word “Declaration of a Global Ethic” at a meeting of the Parliament of the World Religions held in Chicago from 28 August to 4 September, 1993. The Assembly of 6,500 religious and spiritual leaders from all over the world attended the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Parliament's original assembly and Kung's declaration was examined and endorsed by 250 outstanding religious leaders. They briefly traced several aspects of spiritual movement for the New World Order, showing some common sets of core values shared and found in world's religious teaching and affirming that a global ethic is: “a minimal **fundamental consensus** concerning binding **values**, irrevocable **standard**, and fundamental **moral**

**attitudes**”<sup>2</sup> or it can be elucidated in the negative connotations that it is not: “a global ideology or a **single unified religion** beyond all existing religions, and certainly not the domination of one religion over all others”<sup>3</sup>

In order to encourage the challenging pace to world peace, Kung has made a variety of efforts to prevent the predominance of any other institutional influences and cultural paradigms in Declaration of a Global Ethic. To achieve a genuine unity of ethic characterized by a sound and healthy diversity interacting by the world’s religions – Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Confucianism and so on, he attentively sought the new way of defining a global ethic, as follow:

Ethic is the translation of the Greek word **Ethos** and means a **basic human moral attitudes**, whereas ethics denotes the philosophical or theological theory of moral attitudes and norms. Global ethic should offer a **minimal ethic**, it can not replace or generate, lets say the Christian Sermon on the Mount. The Discourses of Buddha or the Sayings of Confucius. All these particular religions state a **maximal ethic**.<sup>4</sup>

Ethic is therefore often the product of particular traditions of a community. The emergence of the particularist basis (-- vaguely defined as we cannot transcend particular moral or cultural principles) may hinder all humanity from the true understanding of a global ethic. If each religion always believes that one’s own creed and cult are the most powerful and can solely inspire the followers to live a much more superior life, a global ethic’s concerns cannot be given a hearing. Thus, Kung emphasized in the document that: “the one world in which we live has a chance of survival only if there is no longer any room in it for spheres of differing, contradictory and even antagonistic ethics”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Kung, Hans. *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1998), p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Kung, Hans. *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1998), p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Kung, Hans. *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*. 9 New York: Continuum. 1996, p. 138.

Central to Kung's endeavor, declaration of a global ethic tends to give the primacy to the quest of mankind – for survival and global peace. Then, a true ethic of humanity and for humanity must:

... penetrate to a **deeper ethical level**, the level of **binding values, irrevocable criteria and inner basic attitudes**... an ethic is primarily concerned with the inner realm of a person, the sphere of the conscience, of the heart. It must be capable of securing a consensus ... must be critical ... must be related to reality ... must be generally comprehensible and must have a religious foundation.<sup>6</sup>

A beginning attempt along these lines deals with the common human path to a global society. The path which 'down – to – earth' human values in world's religions are meaningfully found. We can realize the coming of ethic 'from below'. Of course, this human ethic does not belong to any specific castes, creeds or cults because the main themes of this true ethic are beyond the reach of institutional or authoritative power. As long as the old command – and – control language and the rigid image of existing religions was oriented to the past rather than the future, we should prefer a simpler, common statement of a minimal ethic – a real human value embedded in the heart, rather than in the scripture. There comes to be established a global ethic, as operational norms and values, in the framework of a global responsibility to be acted on.

## 2. A universal moral wisdom – *the Golden Rule*

All human societies have their own systems of generally accepted values which provide goals, means, and orientation for the individual as well as for society. History reveals that mankind's great value systems are rooted in the great historic religions and their deep-rooted traditions. The values and standards people followed were an integral part of their communal culture, from which they also obtained their motivation for moral.

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<sup>6</sup> Kung, Hans. *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1998), p. 58-59.

Kung stated that *'there can be no new global order without a new global ethic'*. Nonetheless, the basis for this global ethic can already be found in the world's religions. To foster a future collaboration, it is affirmed that:

There is an irrevocable, unconditional norms for all areas of life, for families and communities, for nations, and religions. There already exist ancient guidelines for human behavior which are found in the teachings of the religions of the world and which are the condition for sustainable world order.<sup>7</sup>

There are common ethical teachings in the world's religions that can serve as a framework for interreligious relations. They can also provide a basic for united response to many of the crises and conflicts of our time. Significantly, the pursuit of a global ethic shared by world's religions starts its spiritual pace with the "Golden Rule" – Treat others as we would be treated and this would become the fundamental demand along the development of a true vision of universality. The universal norm "every human being must be treated humanely" must be applied to all in the context of concrete situation. As Kung says:

This means that every human being without distinction of age, sex, race, skin color, physical or mental ability, language, religion, political view, or national or social origin possesses an inalienable and untouchable dignity, and everyone is therefore obliged to honor this dignity and protect it.<sup>8</sup>

From its fundamental principles, declaration of a global ethic features four "irrevocable directives" or "moral guidelines for human behavior" on which world's religions agree:

**1. Commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for all life:**

The age-old directive: You shall not kill! Or in positive terms: Have respect for life!

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

**2. Commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order:**

The age-old directive: You shall not steal! Or in positive terms: Deal honestly and fairly!

**3. Commitment to a culture of tolerance and life of truthfulness:**

The age-old directive: You shall not lie! Or in positive terms: Speak and act truthfully!

**4. Commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women:**

The age-old directive: You shall not commit sexual immorality! Or in positive terms: Respect and love one another!

These commitments could comfortably form part of a global ethic, along with the Golden Rule, and thus derive from common features of world's religion. Thus, it is uniquely focused on a shared vision of basic values to be implemented by all religions for the sake of a sustainable global society. Notwithstanding, people are often surprised and pleased to discover version of the Golden Rule in many spiritual Traditions. It should be noted, however, that the Golden Rule crosses so many traditions and philosophies, it possesses tremendous moral authority and indicates a profound human unity. Here are some religious expressions to facilitate the universal moral truth – “*The Golden Rule is Across the World's Religions*”:

**Buddhism**

Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.

*The Buddha, Udāna-Vagga 5.1*

**Christianity**

In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

*Jesus, Matthew 7:12*

**Confucianism**

One word which sums up the basis of all good conduct ... loving-kindness. Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself.

*Confucius, Analects 15.23*

### **Hinduism**

This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what could cause pain if done to you.

*Mahabharata 5: 1517*

### **Islamism**

Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself.

*The Prophet Muhammad, 13<sup>th</sup> of the 40 Hadiths of Nawawi etc.*

### **Jainism**

One should treat all creatures in the world as one would like to be treated.

*Mahavira, Suttrakritanga*

### **Judaism**

What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole. *Torah*; all the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.

*Hillel, Talmud, Shabbath 319*

### **Sikhism**

I am a stranger to no one; and no one is a stranger to me. Indeed, I am a friend to all.

*Guru Granth Sahib, pg. 1299*

### **Taoism**

Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain and your neighbor's loss as your own loss.

*Lao Tzu (T'ai Shang Kan Ying P'ien), 213-218 and so on.*

At a dramatic pace of multicultural and multireligious movement, the effort to develop a global ethic, which calls upon the shared wisdom of the world's religion considers the Golden Rule to be a key reference point. Here, the Golden Rule – **Treat others as we would be treated** – is not just a moral ideal for relationships between people but also for relationships among nations, cultures, races and religions. Or it is to say that the Golden Rule, as a universal value for all, makes us conscious of the interdependence and interrelatedness of all lives on earth.

Up to this point, we come to the main task of this paper, ... to seek a common basic human ethic which is seen to be universally applicable to all human being but the real challenge is that – how can we gain access to the village of “a common basic human ethic” or “how can we acquire the wisdom of the Golden Rule? As it is believed that – this is the most fundamental and moral quest of all humanity.

### **How Can We Make A Full Use of A Global Ethic ?**

It is important to recognize that a global ethic is a common basic human ethic which all people of different nations and religions already hold in common. The pursuit of a global ethic shared by all world’s religions starts with the Golden Rule – “*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*”, the maxim which has persisted in many ethical traditions of humankind for thousands of years. The Parliament of the World Religions agreeably endorsed the message of the Golden Rule as a vitally important and unifying ethical principle leading to the development of a global responsibility. The society based on this kind of ethic should be the society filled with a good life—a life of mutual respect, understanding and collaboration; why in many cases – the world is still in agony and conflict?

For what I have been studying, a global ethic as defined by Hans Kung as “a minimal fundamental consensus on ethic” has a strength – it is undebatable for the world’s religions as long as this common basic human ethic already existed and all commonly accept it, moreover, it shows good values among humanity. (*there is some human values in common that I have it ... you have it ... and we have it ... Hurrah!*). Unfortunately, what is common always seems to be trivial considering a global ethic by Hans Kung did not provide the answer to the vital question of our time

Thing needed to be noted at this point is that – before we can acquire the soul of a global ethicist to carry out a global responsibility to promote the New World Order; we have to deal with the most basic quest of humanity first, -- how can we acquire the wisdom of the Golden Rule?

As long as its wisdom is universal, it is time the Golden Rule has come to mean not **less**, but a great deal **more** to a global society only if **good moral habits based on the teaching of the Golden Rule is wholeheartedly implanted to individual human being's life throughout the process of values formation**. In the Nichomachean Ethics; for Aristotle, *moral virtue is something that is practiced and thereby learned – it is habit (hexis)*:

Moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name **ethike** is one that is formed by a slight variation from the world **ethos** (habit). From this it is also plain that none of the moral virtues arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature ... Nor can anything else that by nature behaves in one way be trained to behave in another. Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.<sup>9</sup>

This has clear implications for moral education, because *Aristotle obviously thinks that you can teach people to be virtuous*. Thus, if the wisdom of the Golden Rule is commonly inculcated as a major principle of the moral education, our children can gradually realize its universal value and would view things in the eyes of all humanity. Anyway, as expressed by the African phrase, “*it takes a village to raise a child*”, children are raised through their interaction with numerous influential people, media, and institution – for good or ill –, some may wonder about the effectiveness of the Golden Rule in our media and market-dominated culture. Again, the formation of moral virtues is gradually developed by learning:

Every virtue is both produced and destroyed ... men will be good or bad builders as a result of building well or badly. This, then, is the case with the virtues also; by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or

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<sup>9</sup> Nichomachean Ethics, 2.1.

cowardly. The same is true of appetites and feelings of anger; some men become temperate and good-tempered, others self-indulgent and irascible, by behaving in one way or the other in the appropriate circumstances. Thus, in one word, states of character arise out of like activities.<sup>10</sup>

As an old proverb says “*Like father, like son. Like mother, like daughter. Like begets like*”. Acknowledging this: parents, educators and clergy must search for ways to teach appropriate moral and religious education in their home as well as in private religious schools and places of worship. The home and family are the essential components of the values formation and the primary responsibility for teaching common basic human ethic to our children falls on parents. Teaching the Golden Rule, as a universal value to all mankind parents and children will find support and profound insights in the wisdom of other traditions for their own understanding and behavior. Furthermore, children can thus learn a mature way of relating to the members of other religions that they increasingly find in their communities, in order to respect and recognize the others as a human person like themselves.

Significantly, a good home environment and good example from the parents are major factors in the nonacademic education of children. Teaching the Golden Rule during early childhood, children should be encouraged and even forced to do acts which are universally good by exploring this universal wisdom in real-life situations. We could see that if the minds of the children are well-trained, so that the children may live good adult lives, as will become clear:

For the things we have before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.<sup>11</sup>

Good moral habits must be acquired in childhood, or they are very difficult to acquire. Thus, the parents should provide the ‘appropriate’ moral and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

religious instructions to their children; the Golden Rule is best fitted to a purpose of a global society!

Far from being only a maxim for playground behavior, the Golden Rule were thus restored to prominence in an authoritative global ethic; which is applicable in their diversity to all spheres of our personal, international and spiritual lives together on this global society.

## Conclusion

We are now living in the world of confusions and conflicts. When we look around, we find that numberless mankind has been entrapping in the growing injustice, poverty and difficulty in all paces of life: political, social, economic and most importantly moral aspects. The bonds which hold society together are constantly weakening, living together with others is becoming increasingly more difficult – one becomes indifferent to the well-being of others and is only concerned to get the best for oneself. The need for an ethic for mankind, though, is increasingly recognized.

Mankind's global society is in need of a global code of ethics. Hans Kung, a renowned Catholic theologian, has acknowledged that *this world only has a chance of survival if it is endowed with a common, universal standard of values, ideals and goals*. The recent centenary celebration of the parliament of the World Religions in Chicago has approved a Declaration of a Global Ethic and solemnly presented **a statement of a minimal ethic on which all could agree**. This global ethic can only be based on the common values of the great world's religions – **the Golden Rule** which can provide man with an absolute norm and is also practical in our global society. It is opined, thus:

... if we could articulate the points of agreement among the world religions, a transcultural revelation of the basic values of human life which the world religions hold in common would emerge. We would identify the spiritual heritage of the entire human family, However diversely each religion and culture celebrates it. If this consensus could then be injected, with one voice, into the global arena, the world religions would be contributing an all-important spiritual dimension to the decision making process

In an ever more interdependent world, human responsibility toward the well-being of oneself and others must be guided by a global ethic which its core principle – the Golden Rule is compatible with the basic values the world’s culture and religions hold in common. The aim of this paper is to explore its wisdom educationally with an eye for practical implementation considering today most parents no longer impart this universal consciousness to their children, as a result, a lack of common human value gradually threatens a global society from inside.

For Aristotle, moral virtue is something that is practiced and thereby learned – it is habit (*hexis*). Thus, it can be stated that we can teach people to be virtuous, thus, good moral habits must be acquired throughout the period of values formation especially in childhood, or they are very difficult to acquire.

In purpose and result, a global ethic can provide us the necessary first step in achieving peace among religions. But is peace possible? Kung states: “Wars, are in no way a part of human nature, ... they are not **innate** but **learned**. Ethical progress is possible, according to Kung, through our choice to act more ethically than we have before. The future is up to us”.

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