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Declaration Toward a Global Ethic

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“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, organised crime, and even anarchy. Even neighbours 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.”

Those words, cries of despair on the one hand and a call for hope on the other, are the introduction to the Declaration Toward a Global Ethic, written by Catholic theologian Hans Küng and signed by approximately 200 delegates, coming from at least 15 faith traditions, to the 1993 World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago.

Although it would be, as a practical matter, impossible to discuss the declaration in detail within the limitations of today's service, I would like to talk about some of the highlights, and I invite you to look at the whole declaration which is available on line. The Internet address for the complete, official text, including a list of signatories, is printed in your order of service. (Click [here](#))

The Global Ethic is based on two main principles:

First, that there should be and can be “No new global order without a new global ethic!” And second, the fundamental demand that “every human being must be treated humanely.”

In regard to the first principle, the Declaration states that

- a better global order cannot be created or enforced by laws, prescriptions, and conventions alone;
- the realisation of peace, justice, and the protection of Earth depends on the insight and readiness of men and women to act justly;
- action in favour of rights and freedoms presumes a consciousness of responsibility and duty, and that therefore both the minds and hearts 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.

The second principle, that every human being should be treated humanely, states that, although “religions cannot solve the environmental, economic, political, and social problems of Earth (...) they can provide what obviously cannot be attained by economic plans, political programs, or legal regulations alone: A change in the inner orientation, the whole mentality, the "hearts" of people, and a conversion from a false path to a new orientation for life.

Humankind urgently needs social and ecological reforms, but it needs spiritual renewal just as urgently. As religious or spiritual persons we commit ourselves to this task. The spiritual powers of the religions can offer a fundamental sense of trust, a ground of meaning, ultimate standards, and a spiritual home.

Of course religions are credible only when they eliminate those conflicts which spring from the religions themselves, dismantling mutual arrogance, mistrust, prejudice, and even hostile images, and thus demonstrate respect for the traditions, holy places, feasts, and rituals of people who believe differently.

(...)There is a principle which is found and has persisted in many religious and ethical traditions of humankind for thousands of years: What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others. Or in positive terms: What you wish done to yourself, do to others!”

A listing of variations on this so-called Golden Rule, as it appears in many of the world’s religions, is also available on the Internet. The URL is also in your order of service. (Click [here](#), see the heading “Excursus: The Golden Rule”)

The Declaration continues that that Golden Rule: “should be the irrevocable, unconditional norm for all areas of life, for families and communities, for races, nations, and religions.

Every form of egoism should be rejected: All selfishness, whether individual or collective, whether in the form of class thinking, racism, nationalism, or sexism. We condemn these because they prevent humans from being authentically human. Self-determination and self-realisation are thoroughly legitimate so long as they are not separated from human self-responsibility and global responsibility, that is, from responsibility for fellow humans and for the planet Earth.”

Rather than simply being a random collection of pure thoughts and soft principles, the Declaration contains a number of what it calls irrevocable directives.

They are:

- Commitment to a Culture of Non-violence and Respect for Life
- Commitment to a Culture of Solidarity and a Just Economic Order
- Commitment to a Culture of Tolerance and a Life of Truthfulness
- Commitment to a Culture of Equal Rights and Partnership Between Men and Women
- The more critical minds among us will immediately see a minefield of terminology here. The first point, for example, in which a culture of nonviolence is twinned with respect for life. What does that mean to the conflict between pro-life and pro-choice supporters?
- The declaration recognises that where there are people, there will be conflicts, but calls for those conflicts to be settled without violence in a framework of justice.
- The second point also has a great deal of room for dispute. What, for example, is a ‘just economic order’? The Declaration states that “[I]n many lands, the gap between the poor and the rich, between the powerful and the powerless is immense. We live in a world in which totalitarian state socialism as well as unbridled capitalism have hollowed out and destroyed many ethical and spiritual values. A materialistic mentality breeds greed for unlimited profit and a grasping for endless plunder. These demands claim more and more of the community's resources without obliging the individual to contribute more.
- The cancerous social evil of corruption thrives in the developing countries and in the developed countries alike.”
- To be authentically human, the Declaration continues:

- We must utilize economic and political power for service to humanity instead of misusing it in ruthless battles for domination. We must develop a spirit of compassion with those who suffer, with special care for the children, the aged, the poor, the disabled, the refugees, and the lonely.
- We must cultivate mutual respect and consideration, so as to reach a reasonable balance of interests, instead of thinking only of unlimited power and unavoidable competitive struggles.
- We must value a sense of moderation and modesty instead of an unquenchable greed for money, prestige, and consumption. In greed, humans lose their "souls," their freedom, their composure, their inner peace, and thus that which makes them human.

The third point, which calls for the creation of a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness, recalls religious texts which call for dealings with one another to be based on truth, not lies and manipulation.

A particular burden in this regard is placed on

- those who work in the mass media, to whom we entrust the freedom to report for the sake of truth and to whom we thus grant the office of guardian;
- artists, writers, and scientists, to whom we entrust artistic and academic freedom;
- the leaders of countries, politicians, and political parties, to whom we entrust our own freedoms;
- and, finally, for representatives of religion. When they stir up prejudice, hatred, and enmity towards those of different belief, or even incite or legitimise religious wars, they deserve the condemnation of humankind and the loss of their adherents.

To be authentically human in the context of this principle means that:

- We must not confuse freedom with arbitrariness or pluralism with indifference to truth;
- We must cultivate truthfulness in all our relationships instead of dishonesty, dissembling, and opportunism;
- We must constantly seek truth and incorruptible sincerity instead of spreading ideological or partisan half-truths;
- We must courageously serve the truth and we must remain constant and trustworthy, instead of yielding to opportunistic accommodation to life;

The fourth point calls for Commitment to a Culture of Equal Rights and

Partnership Between Men and Women. It states that "all over the world there are condemnable forms of patriarchy, domination of one sex over the other, exploitation of women, sexual misuse of children, and forced prostitution."

Recalling the religious principles: You shall not commit sexual immorality! Or in positive terms: Respect and love one another!, this principle notes that "The relationship between women and men should be characterised not by patronising behaviour or exploitation, but by love, partnership, and trustworthiness."

To be authentically human in the spirit of mankind's great religious and ethical traditions means, then:

- We need mutual respect, partnership, and understanding, instead of patriarchal domination and degradation, which are expressions of violence and engender counter-violence.
- We need mutual concern, tolerance, readiness for reconciliation, and love, instead of any form of possessive lust or sexual misuse.

To achieve the Declaration's objectives, the drafters and signatories recognised that a transformation of consciousness would be needed. While noting that such a transformation has not yet taken place, "The possibilities for transformation have already been glimpsed in areas such as war

and peace, economy, and ecology, where in recent decades fundamental changes have taken place. This transformation must also be achieved in the area of ethics and values! Every individual has intrinsic dignity and inalienable rights, and each also has an inescapable responsibility for what she or he does and does not do. All our decisions and deeds, even our omissions and failures, have consequences.

Keeping this sense of responsibility alive, deepening it and passing it on to future generations, is the special task of religions.”

In its final lines, the declaration states that:

“Earth cannot be changed for the better unless the consciousness of individuals is changed. We pledge to work for such transformation in individual and collective consciousness, for the awakening of our spiritual powers through reflection, meditation, prayer, or positive thinking, for a conversion of the heart. Together we can move mountains! Without a willingness to take risks and a readiness to sacrifice there can be no fundamental change in our situation!”

Lest you think that this is only a matter for the churches, synagogues, mosques or temples, I want to remind you that the signatories to the original

Declaration signed on their own behalf as individuals, not as official representatives of their religious organisations. Everyone should be encouraged to look at the Declaration for themselves and to sign *it*, or something very much like it, on their own behalf to help focus their own daily conduct.

You don’t have to *actually* sign it, of course, although you might want to. You can also sign it spiritually, which may in fact be more binding.

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