

I have been asked to address the topic of a New Global Ethics from an Islamic perspective and to say something about issues pertaining to cultural diversity, the wider context of this discussion.

Let me begin by saying that I find the term 'New Global Ethics' to be interesting but also problematic. It reminds me of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which, although it was called universal, was – as pointed out by Raimundo Panikkar – 'articulated along the lines of historical trends of the Western world during the last three centuries, and a certain philosophical anthropology of individualistic humanism which helped justify them'.¹ The basic assumptions underlying the Declaration were a) of a universal human nature common to all the peoples, b) of the dignity of the individual, and c) of a democratic social order.²

In the decades since the Declaration, the term 'human rights' has become an integral part of both political and popular discourse, particularly among Western, and Western-educated, persons. Until recently most of this discourse has been in largely secular terms. In fact, it has been frequently assumed, as well as stated, by many advocates of human rights, in both Western and non-Western (including many Muslim) countries, that human rights can exist only within a secular context and not within the framework of religion.

Underlying the stance that the concept of human rights is fundamentally secular, and, therefore, outside of, and even antithetical to, the world view of religion, is – of

course – a certain view of religion in general, or of particular religions. In some Muslim countries such as Pakistan, for instance, it is often remarked by secular-minded proponents of human rights that it is not meaningful to talk about human rights in Islam because, as a religious tradition, Islam has supported values and structures that are incompatible with the assumptions which underlie the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The fact that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights does not acknowledge religion as a source of human rights points to what I consider a critical flaw in the orientation of the United Nations. It is understandable why, in 1948, against the backdrop of massive human conflicts, the United Nations would have wanted to distance itself from any sort of identification with religion which has contributed significantly throughout history to divisiveness and strife in the world. However, it is far less credible that the United Nations should have become so trapped in its secular discourse that it could continue until recently to refuse to deal with the fact that for millions of human beings whose lives are rooted in belief rather than unbelief, human rights become meaningful only when they are placed within the framework of their belief-system.

It has become increasingly clear in the last few years as the United Nations has tried to grapple with concrete issues pivotal to human development and self-actualization, that neither the alleged universality of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights nor the modern Western assumptions which underlie it, are universally acceptable or applicable. This has been pointed out by Johan D. van der Vyver who was one of the co-ordinators of a two-year international project on religion and human rights sponsored by Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, to which I was privileged to contribute. In the introduction to the two-volume publication entitled *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective* which resulted from the project, Professor Van de Vyver stated:

*'There has been a new rivalry looming in international politics, founded, more or less, on an East-West contingent; and in this instance not centred upon the divergence of economic structures, but instead on the schism of religiously-based forces. Eastern religions, with Islam in the lead, are increasingly questioning the Western perceptions of human rights and challenging the claim to prime authenticity of the liberal individualistic nuance of the human rights ideology as devised and understood in the West. While Western traditions by and large founded the typical liberal perceptions of human rights on a secularized base, most Eastern proponents of human rights seek to construct an intimate link of the values embodied in that ideology with decidedly religious presuppositions. In the East, more so than in the West, human rights perceptions are accordingly conditioned by uncompromising tenets of religious belief.'*³

A strong showing of resistance, particularly by Muslims, to what was perceived as 'secular humanism in the West with a strong individualistic nuance'⁴ was visible at the NGO forum of all the recent United Nations conferences, namely, the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, the International Conference on Population and Development at Cairo in 1994, and the World Conference on Women at Huairou

in 1995. The fact that at the conclusion of the Cairo Conference, perhaps the most controversial of all the United Nations conferences to date, religion – which had not been mentioned in the original draft of the conference – and ethics and culture – which had been mentioned a few times only in passing – were clearly recognized as factors relevant in population planning and development, marked a shift radical enough to be called a paradigm shift, in the orientation of the United Nations. That religion – a topic which was long considered taboo – was one of the major subjects of discussion at the NGO Forum in China – shows that there has been a decisive shift away from the wholly secular mindset of the world organization. This development is likely, in my judgment, to make the United Nations more effective in reaching out to masses of people in many parts of the world.

The idea of developing a Declaration of the Religions for a Global Ethic was launched by the Council of the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago as part of the commemoration of the centenary of the first Parliament of the World's Religions meeting in Chicago in 1893. This important enterprise represented, in a significant way, an attempt by representatives of world religions to develop a document which would, in some ways, be complementary to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But whereas the latter had dissociated itself from religion the new declaration would be grounded in religion.

The task of preparing the draft of this declaration was given to Professor Dr Hans Küng, one of the most eminent religious thinkers and scholars of our times with whom I have had the honour of working in the context of Christian-Muslim interreligious dialogue both in Tübingen and in Pakistan. Referring to this assignment, Professor Küng stated:

*'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 corrections were submitted, which I have now taken into account as carefully as possible in a second draft, the text has thereby gained in precision.'*⁵

The Declaration Toward a Global Ethic developed by Professor Küng 'was signed by most of the nearly two hundred delegates who attended the Parliament of World's Religions'⁶ in September 1993. Here, it is of interest to note that in January 1993, at an annual meeting of a Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue held in Graz, Austria, a document entitled 'Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic' had been presented for an in-depth analysis and critique by Professor Dr Leonard Swidler. I have had the privilege of working since 1979 with Professor Swidler who is the initiator of the dialogue or Interreligious Dialogue among Jews, Christians and Muslims, in the United States, and was a participant in the discussion which took place in Graz, although, unfortunately, illness prevented me from attending the discussion on global ethics directed by Professor Küng at Chicago.

I have deep respect for both Professor Küng and Professor Swidler and I know that their efforts to develop documents which could be regarded as universally-agreed ethical guideposts for a world which faces serious moral, political, economic and ecological crises on the eve of the twenty-first century, stem from a lifetime of dedication to the pursuit of truth and justice not only in scholarship, but also in real life. I am also aware of the fact that both Professor Küng and Professor Swidler have consulted with various persons, including scholars, from the major religious traditions of the world in their endeavour to make their documents as representative of a global consensus on ethical principles as they possibly could in their given settings and time-frames. Further, both Professor Küng and Professor Swidler have presented their documents as 'a tentative draft'⁷ and 'not an end but a beginning'.⁸ The Preface to *A Global Ethics* edited by Professor Küng and Professor Kuschel expressed the hope

*'that this document may set off a process which changes the behaviour of men and women in the religions in the direction of understanding, respect and cooperation. And if all goes well, in the not too distant future we shall have other declarations which make the global ethics of the religions more precise and concrete and add further illustrations to it. Perhaps one day there may be even a United Nations Declaration on Global Ethics to provide moral support for a Declaration of Human Rights, which is so often ignored and cruelly violated.'*⁹

While appreciating the intentions and affirmations, and the hopes of my esteemed colleagues Professor Küng, Professor Swidler, and also Professor Kuschel, as a Muslim and as a woman human rights activist I must express the difficulties I experience with the concept as well as the methodology of what is popularly being referred to as a New Global Ethics – a title which troubles me and raises two important questions for me. 1) What is *new* about this ethic or ethics? and 2) in what sense is this ethic or ethics *global*?

While the two versions of the declaration towards, or on, global ethic or ethics with which I am familiar purport to identify and include those ethical principles which are common to most, particularly the major, religions of the world, it seems to me that their fundamental presuppositions are *a priori*. They are not the products of an internal dialogue within each religion regarding its central ethical concerns and principles, widening into a dialogue with other religions on the same matters. Rather, they represent the thinking of post-Enlightenment Westerners who are mostly Christian either religiously or culturally. In this context I find the following remarks by Professor Dr John Hick, another respected partner-in-dialogue, to be highly pertinent:

'The difficulty in offering a distinctively Christian comment on Leonard Swidler's draft is that it is already in an important sense a Christian document. For since the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century Western Christianity has been increasingly suffused with the individualistic, democratic, liberal, historically-minded, science-oriented outlook of the Enlightenment, an outlook that constitutes what can comprehensively be called the ethos of modernity. Indeed Christianity, as a cultural influence, is identified in the minds of many Christians, particularly when they make comparisons with other religions, with these liberal ideas of modernity. From an historical point of view, this is paradoxical. For what has happened is that secular modernity has transformed the outlook

*of most of the Christian World, rather than that Christianity has out of its own distinctive religious resources introduced these modern liberal values into Western culture. Indeed during much the greater part of its history Christianity has been neither democratic, nor liberal, nor science-oriented, nor historically-minded or individualistic in the modern sense. In saying, then, that Leonard Swidler's is a Christian draft I merely mean that it comes out of contemporary Western Christianity and embodies the spirit of post-Enlightenment culture. Anyone reading it can readily identify its provenance, reflecting as it does the concerns and presuppositions of modernity.'*¹⁰

The fact that the comments of non-Westerners or non-Christians have been elicited to the drafts prepared by Western Christian scholars does not alter the fact that these drafts do not reflect the ethos of the religions of the world. The references to selective citations from different sacred texts to support the presuppositions of the drafts do not substantiate the claim that these presuppositions represent a consensus of the world's religions on ethical principles. We have all heard the saying, that the devil can quote the scripture for his purpose. It is not only the devil, but all of us, who are susceptible to the temptation to cite quotations out of context or to look at them in a limited context when we are trying to prove what we consider to be a self-evident truth. In other words – in the language of computer science – when we are goal-driven rather than data-driven, we tend not to see the total picture and its complexity but to be content with simple answers to complicated questions. In this context also, the comment by Professor Hick in response to Professor Swidler's draft, merits serious consideration:

'This first draft, produced by Leonard Swidler (and likewise the basically similar draft produced by Hans Küng), must not stand as the one official draft which is to be amended, added to, and developed by contributions from the rest of the world. It is essential that as early in the process as possible other independent initial drafts be forthcoming from within the cultures of China, Africa, Russia, India, the Islamic world, the Buddhist world, the primal life-streams. Only then, with the comparison and interaction of these perhaps significantly different drafts, will the movement towards a genuinely global declaration be able to proceed beyond its present state. At least as important, then, as the organizing of intensive discussions of our Western draft must be the eliciting of Asian, African, Pacific and other drafts.

In this first stage of the search for a global ethic, rather than getting the peoples of other cultures to debate our Western draft, agreeing or disagreeing with it as the only document on the table, we should say: 'Here is the kind of draft that comes naturally to us in the industrialized West. What kind of draft comes naturally to you, and to you, and to you?' And then the next stage beyond this should be to bring a plurality of drafts together and see what comes out of the interaction between them.

I do not think that in any of this I am diverging from what Leonard Swidler has in mind. I want particularly to stress, however, the need to move as soon as possible from a one-draft to a multi-draft situation. So long as we have a modern Western draft there will be the danger of the whole project looking like an act of Western cultural imperialism. This has never been the intention. And the danger can be avoided by directing every effort to get

people from within the other great cultural streams of human life to participate in the search from their own independent points of view.

It is not a legitimate criticism that the search for a global ethic originated in the West; for it had to originate somewhere! And the West probably contains more abundantly than elsewhere the practical resources required to launch and promote the process. But it would be a ground for legitimate criticism if the search remained concentrated around our Western contribution to it. The challenge is now to find ways of opening the discussion up on an equal basis within all the great traditions of the earth.¹¹

Having stated my wider philosophical reservations to the way in which global ethic or ethics has been conceptualized or developed in the West in the last few years, I wish to respond to the topic of a New Global Ethics from a Muslim *religious* perspective. The ethos of the Muslim world is quite different from that of the Western world which rests on Graeco-Roman foundations and in which reason has generally been regarded as the co-equal if not the superior, or the arbiter, of revelation. For the vast majority of Muslims, however, revelation constitutes the highest source of knowledge and is normative for Muslims collectively and individually, in their public as well as their private lives, both in relation to the material world and inner as well as transcendental reality.

There is hardly any doubt that even though Islam is one of the three Abrahamic faiths and is regarded by many Jews and Christians as a prophetic religion, many, if not most, Westerners find it harder to understand or accept Islam and Muslims than any other major religion or its adherents. This is not the time or place to analyze all the historical, political, socio-cultural and theological factors which have brought about such a wide gap of understanding or amity between Islam/Muslims and many non-Muslim Westerners. However, I find it difficult as a Muslim to accept as authentic or effective the lofty principles relating to justice and equity for all peoples contained in the Declaration of Global Ethics, when I see the violence directed against both Muslim men and women in much of the Western world.

I am saddened when I read the statement that 'one day there may even be a new United Nations declaration on a global ethic to provide moral support for the Declaration of Human Rights, which is often ignored and cruelly violated'. One major reason why the Declaration of Human Rights is ignored is because it is not grounded in reality or in the lives of the majority of the peoples of the world. I do not find it helpful when I travel through the Muslim world talking to the average Muslim woman. They have three characteristics: they are poor, they are illiterate and they live in a village. A large number of the over 500 million Muslim women in the world share these characteristics. If I as a person committed to women's empowerment were to try to reach one of these women living anywhere between Ankara and Jakarta, how would I do it? Could I say to her, 'I bring you liberation or empowerment in the name of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)?' This statement would mean nothing to her. But if I were to say to her, 'You believe in God and you know that God is just. Therefore, it cannot be the will of God that you should live in sub-human conditions

and be brutalized or oppressed'. This makes instant sense to her because her religious beliefs constitute the matrix in which her life is rooted. A light begins to shine in her eyes as she realizes that she is not powerless... that the source of empowerment lies within her since God, the universal creator and sustainer, is a just and merciful God who does not condone injustice in any way.

There is no doubt that the very existence of a Universal Declaration of Human Rights is an outstanding achievement of humanity as a whole and that if there were to be a complementary Declaration of Global Ethic this also would be a similar achievement. But declarations alone do not bring about moral or social transformation of society or human beings. Even in the West, the validity of the Greek notion that knowledge is a virtue – that knowing what is right necessarily leads to virtuous conduct – was challenged by David Hume and modern psychology. The Qur'an tells us that the condition of people changes only when they change what is in themselves. If the superpowers which had been instrumental in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights had practised what they preached and had refrained from violating human rights within their own borders or supporting autocratic, anti-human-rights forces in other countries, the state of the world today would have been very different from what it is today. The lesson to be learnt by those who are engaged in developing a Declaration of Global Ethic – I believe – is that any kind of ethic begins at home, with oneself. And that, often, it is much easier to make generalized statements about abstract ethical principles than to deal honestly and deeply with the specificity and complexity of the lives and beliefs of others, particularly those who are seen as adversaries or aliens.

Just as the strongest resistance to the Western notion of human rights has come from Muslims, it is likely that the strongest resistance to the new Western notion of Global Ethics will also come from Muslims. Setting aside for the moment the political and psychological factors which may be involved in this resistance, let me focus on what I consider to be the major *religious* reason why many Muslims would have difficulty subscribing to a New Global Ethic as is being discussed in this forum. In the first place, for the majority of Muslims the highest source of what they consider to be normative Islam or Muslim ethics is the Qur'an as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. Hence for them there is nothing new about the ethics which is relevant to their lives. Secondly, for them the ethical framework of the Qur'an embraces what may be called 'fundamental human rights' or 'principles of global ethics'. Hence there is no need for them to develop a New Global Ethic.

Given the widespread stereotyping of Muslims as fanatic and irrational, or anti-modern and backward, there is a danger that my words may be misconstrued as representing what the West wrongly calls Islamic fundamentalism. While, like the overwhelming majority of Muslims, I, too, believe that the Qur'an is God's Word and *the* highest source of normative Islam, I also believe that the Qur'an is *the* Magna Carta of human rights and that a large part of its concern is to free human beings from the bondage of traditionalism, authoritarianism (religious, political, economic, or any other), tribalism, racism, sexism, slavery or anything else that prohibits or inhibits human beings

from actualizing the qur'anic vision of human destiny embodied in the classic proclamation: 'Towards God is thy limit.'¹²

Since I have a life-commitment to promoting what I consider to be authentic dialogue in the Buberian 'I-Thou' mode, and have spent almost twenty years of my life intensively engaged in a variety of dialogues with men and women from different religions, ideologies, cultures and races, it is my earnest hope that those who are committed to developing Global Ethics in the West will make a serious effort to understand Islam and other religions not from outside but from within. I would like to facilitate this effort in the context of my religious tradition by sharing with you my understanding of what I call the ethical framework of the Qur'an consisting of the rights and responsibilities which are emphasized by qur'anic teachings.

In the account which follows, reference is made to the Qur'an's affirmation of fundamental rights which all human beings ought to possess because they are so deeply rooted in our humanness that their denial or violation is tantamount to a negation or degradation of that which makes us human. From the perspective of the Qur'an, these rights came into existence when we did; they were created, as we were, by God in order that our human potential could be actualized. Rights created or given by God cannot be abolished by any temporal ruler or human agency. Eternal and immutable, they should be exercised since everything that God does is for a 'just purpose'.¹³

A. RIGHT TO LIFE

The Qur'an upholds the sanctity and absolute value of human life¹⁴ and points out that, in essence, the life of each individual is comparable to that of an entire community and, therefore, should be treated with the utmost care.¹⁵

B. RIGHT TO RESPECT

The Qur'an deems all human beings to be worthy of respect¹⁶ because of all creation they alone chose to accept the trust of freedom of the will.¹⁷ Human beings can exercise freedom of the will because they possess the rational faculty, which is what distinguishes them from all other creatures.¹⁸ Though human beings can become 'the lowest of the low', the Qur'an declares that they have been made 'in the best of moulds',¹⁹ having the ability to think, to have knowledge of right and wrong, to do good and to avoid evil. Thus, on account of the promise which is contained in being human, namely, the potential to be God's viceregent on earth, the humanness of all human beings is to be respected and considered to be an end in itself.

C. RIGHT TO JUSTICE

The Qur'an puts great emphasis on the right to seek justice and the duty to do justice.²⁰ In the context of justice, the Qur'an uses two concepts: *'adl* and *ihسان*. Both are enjoined and both are related to the idea of balance, but are not identical in meaning.

'Adl is defined by A.A.A. Fyzee, a well-known scholar of Islam, as 'to be equal, neither more nor less.' Explaining this concept, Fyzee wrote: '...in a Court of Justice the claims of the two parties must be considered evenly, without undue stress being laid upon one side or the other. Justice introduces the balance in the form of scales that

