
TOWARD A GLOBAL ETHIC: A MILESTONE FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

《走向全球伦理宣言》： 各宗教间对话的一座里程碑

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ABSTRACT

This issue of the MRI Journal is focused on the challenge of “Redefining Spiritual Transformation and Holiness in Asian Contexts in Times of Crisis.” How, then, is this agenda to be advanced by recalling the development of the 1993 Parliament of World Religions’ *Declaration: Toward a Global Ethic*? After all, whilst there was significant Asian participation in the Parliament, the *Declaration* was written by a Swiss theologian, Hans Küng, for a meeting organized and held in Chicago, USA. In what follows, I hope to demonstrate the continued relevance of *Toward a Global Ethic* by showing how its basic principles and “irrevocable directives” are grounded in a vision of spiritual transformation and holiness, emerging from dialogues among the world’s major religions and their devotees. The Declaration, initially drafted by Küng, was endorsed by the Council for a Parliament of World Religions (CPWR), was discussed and formally signed by some 240 participants and religious leaders at the 1993 Parliament in Chicago, among the most prominent of them, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, the Catholic Archbishop of Chicago. Their achievement was to demonstrate that interreligious dialogue could not only

remain faithful to the spiritual traditions that brought them together, but also could produce a statement outlining a minimal moral consensus helping to set an agenda for global change that continues to inspire people even to this day. KEY WORDS: Parliament of World's Religions, Toward a Global Ethic, interreligious dialogue, The Golden Rule, morality and spiritual authenticity

(<https://www.parliamentofreligions.org/>). The 1993 Parliament has been followed by Parliaments in Cape Town, South Africa (1999), in Barcelona, Spain (2004), in Melbourne, Australia (2009), in Salt Lake City, Utah, USA (2015), and in Toronto, Canada (2018). This year's Parliament, scheduled October 16-18, was held online because of the global travel restrictions forced by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, the Parliament will return to Chicago to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the

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THE GLOBAL ETHIC: AN UNEXPECTED OUTCOME

The 1993 Parliament was a genuinely grassroots activity. It was not sponsored initially by any denomination, but a coalition of religious activists—myself, at that time a professor in the Department of Religious Studies at DePaul University, included—who, inspired by the Parliament of World Religions of 1893 that occurred as part of the Chicago World’s Fair celebrating the 400th anniversary of Columbus’ “discovery of the New World”, wanted to do another Parliament to coincide with what was anticipated as a second Chicago World’s Fair planned for 1993. It is Providential—an act of divine Grace, if you will—that the City of Chicago abandoned the idea of a second World’s Fair, but those of us who has come together to organize a second Parliament remained steadfast in our commitment to it.

The coalition established itself as the Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions (CPWR) which continues sponsoring the Parliaments to this day

CPWR, now regarded as the birthdate of the modern interfaith movement initially conceived and inspired by the 1893 Parliament. The themes highlighted in the subsequent Parliaments reveal the enduring significance of *Toward a Global Ethic*, a milestone in interreligious dialogue, genuinely emerging at the grassroots level, focusing on social change through spiritual transformation and deepening mutual understanding.

Toward a Global Ethic, ironically enough, was not part of the original agenda for the 1993 Parliament. The three years of planning prior to the Parliament focused instead on creating an innovative venue for inclusive “efforts at mutual understanding” and “an appreciation of all the world’s wisdom traditions” (McCann, 1993). In Chicago, the initial impulse came from groups that had made their mark during the 1893 Parliament, which was seen as a breakthrough for several Asian religious leaders, most notably India’s Swami Vivekananda. As a Catholic, I was interested in the Parliament because it involved the participation of significant American Catholic leadership, notably James Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore, and was regarded as a breakthrough

toward Catholic participation in international interfaith congresses. The hopes harbored in 1893 later were to be dashed by Pope Leo XIII's 1899 condemnation of the "Americanist heresy," itself a prelude to Pope Pius X's condemnation in 1907 of "Modernism".¹

Nevertheless, by 1993, in the aftermath of Vatican II (1962-1965), the stage was set for renewed Catholic participation in interreligious dialogue. Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, the Archbishop of Chicago, agreed to participate, and did not waver in his commitment later when some groups withdrew because the Parliament, in their view, was too inclusive, welcoming devotees of the ancient Egyptian goddess, Isis, as well as members of the Nation of Islam, a local organization that had become controversial in Chicago for its anti-Zionist rhetoric. At any rate, the Parliamentary focus was to be on coalition building, showcasing innovative approaches to interfaith collaboration to address social problems, to be expanded and intensified both locally and globally. Initially, there were very promising developments in Chicago in which members of the Parliamentary coalition were active in promoting a peaceful resolution of disputes in some of the neighborhoods.

Despite these promising beginnings, the effort to organize a new Parliament seemed to be floundering. New religious energies were

being released, hopes raised, but not the financial resources, or organizational planning needed to make the Parliament happen. With a year to go before the Parliament was scheduled, the CPWR Executive Director, Daniel Gomez Ibanez contacted Swiss theologian, Hans Küng, who after his skirmish with the Vatican over his questioning Papal "Infallibility," had been working on interreligious dialogue and had written a book outlining an ethic of Global Responsibility. (Küng, 1991) Küng agreed to work with the CPWR steering committee to formulate the Declaration *Toward a Global Ethic*. His basic contribution was the part of the Declaration that contains "The Principles of the Global Ethic," which is a succinct statement of the deep moral consensus among the world's major religious traditions, roughly equivalent to the 5th through the 8th commandments (Exodus 20:13-16), which have significant parallels in the teaching of Buddhism, Islam, and other traditions.

To his statement of the Principles, the CPWR steering committee appended an "Introduction" that was a *cri de coeur* expressing the spiritual basis, the protest against human suffering, that animates these principles, in both their positive and negative meanings.

"The world is in agony. The agony is so pervasive and urgent that we are compelled to name its manifestations so that the depth of this pain may be made clear.

Peace eludes us – the planet is being destroyed – neighbors live in fear – women and men are estranged from each other – children die!

This is abhorrent..." (CPRW, 1993, p. 1)

The Introduction is a religious protest against the evils afflicting humanity and declares that "this agony need not be." The Declaration asserts that an "ethic" of resistance already exists in the moral teachings of the World's religious traditions that

¹ The "Americanist heresy" remains controversial, with debate focused on whether it was a "phantom" or a tendency toward too uncritical an openness toward modernity, characterized by personal freedom, critical thinking, voluntary association, especially as emerging in ecumenical and interfaith assemblies, thought to be a threat to Catholic tradition. The galvanizing point prompting the Papal condemnation was the publication in France of a biography of Fr. Isaac Hecker, the founder of the Paulist community of priests, whose mission was the conversion of non-Catholic Americans. (See D. J. O'Brien, 1992; R. Shaw, 2013). Whatever the merits of the Americanist controversy, the condemnation of "Modernism" in 1907 (See *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2016) prompted a full scale repression of Catholic participation in interreligious dialogues, at least until after the Second Vatican Council, which recognized and advanced the drive for renewal in the Catholic Church through a critical appreciation of tradition, and adaptation to modern times, in a word, "*aggiornamento*," a reform intending to update the Church's approach to the world and its diversity of peoples and cultures.

provide “an irrevocable, unconditional norm for all areas of life, for families and communities, for races, nations, and religions.” The Introduction also affirms that commitment to this global ethic requires a spiritual transformation:

“Earth cannot be changed for the better unless the consciousness of individuals is changed first. We pledge to increase our awareness by disciplining our minds, by meditation, by prayer, or by positive thinking.” (CPRW, 1993, p. 2)

which interprets the minimum moral consensus implicit in the Golden Rule:

1. Commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life (“You shall not kill.”)
2. Commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order (“You shall not steal.”)
3. Commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness (“You shall not lie.”)
4. Commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women (“You shall not commit sexual immorality.”)

“Interreligious dialogue and collaboration mean working together to establish coalitions among spiritually committed persons in various religious communities, who come together to learn from one another, to share insights into what can be done to reach out to others, to engage ordinary people in the work of discovering the meaning of spiritual transformation and galvanizing their spiritual energies to collaborate in overcoming the sufferings that prompted the search for a Global Ethic.”

The Principles of the Global Ethic begin with a statement of the need for a vision of people living peacefully together. While the United Nations 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is invoked as a model, the Parliament’s Declaration observes that “rights without morality cannot long endure, and that *there will be no better global order without a global ethic.*” (CPRW, 1993, p. 5) What, then, is a global ethic? It must declare “*a fundamental consensus on binding values, irrevocable standards, and personal attitudes*” which starts with “a fundamental demand: Every human being must be treated humanely.” The Global Ethic’s basic Principle is recognizable as the Golden Rule, honored in Biblical teaching (Matthew 7:12), in Confucian teaching (Analects 15:24), as well as in Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and other traditions.

The basic Principle then is explained in terms of four “Irrevocable Directives,” each of

In 2018, the Parliament added a 5th Directive, “Commitment to a Culture of Sustainability and Care for the Earth” reflecting the growing concern over climate change and the global environmental crisis.

Each Directive is grounded in religious traditions, for Christians easily recognizable as the Ten Commandments, which have parallels in the basic moral teachings of other religions. Each Directive briefly addresses the need for its Commitment, outlines its practical implications, alerts “young people” to the challenge of learning to live by it, and suggests the importance of global cooperation among religions and cultures to fulfill its promise. Rather than go into details, offering a moral casuistry defining specific goals for global

implementation,² each Directive highlights the spiritual transformation required for it to make a difference in the lives of suffering humanity. The Global Ethic thus shifts the emphasis of the Parliament's deliberations from moral reasoning to a renewed quest for authenticity. A convergence of efforts to realize a global spiritual transformation would have to be realised before a universal moral consensus on specific policy reforms could be enacted.

Though the 1993 Parliament culminated with the signing of the Declaration, it and subsequent Parliaments unfolded more like a religious bazaar, or carnival, with many opportunities for celebration, prayer, meditation, and dialogue. Given the priority on providing a venue for experiences of spiritual inclusiveness, it should come as no surprise that the Parliament featured ritual dancing and other ecstatic forms of communal prayer, worship, and meditation, welcoming others to explore new ways of affirming Life, Love, and their devotion to the Living God. The enduring challenge for those committed to implementing the Global Ethic is how to channel the spiritual energies so released into focused commitment to change the world.

TAKING THE GLOBAL ETHIC SERIOUSLY

What needs to be changed, however, includes a transformation of spirituality itself. As David Hollenbach has pointed out, it is not enough to show that all the world's major religious traditions profess some version of the

2 One reason for not going into specifics is that preliminary efforts to do so demonstrated that there was no such consensus beyond a commitment to the basic directives. The formulation of key Directives, for example, number 4: "Commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women," indicated that questions of human rights, the role of women in society, marriage, divorce, birth control and abortion, remained unresolved in terms of specific proposals for implementing reforms, beyond the generalized pledge that all should treat each other humanely. As Küng pointed out, the Directives stated only a basic minimum that might establish a framework for further dialogue and collaboration.

Golden Rule. (Hollenbach, 2021) Each of these traditions in turn has waffled on what the Golden Rule means, who is allowed to shelter under its peace. If the Golden Rule is twisted so that its protection only extends as far as membership in the community that ascribes to it, then it is not inclusive enough to support a Global Ethic. True spirituality must struggle to free itself from the false zealotry that sees no further than exclusivism, that cannot imagine working peaceably for our common good with those who are different for one reason or another. The way toward a genuinely Global Ethic must struggle with the challenges that Pope Francis recently laid out in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (2020).³ Fraternity achieved through reconciliation and forgiveness, including especially a recognition of one's own sins against solidarity and openness to others, is indispensable if the Global Ethic is to fulfill its early promise.

Fratelli Tutti marks a deepening of the agenda for a Global Ethic. The Parliament(s) are performative and should not be dismissed as a distraction from deliberations regarding the Global Ethic. For all their carnival atmosphere, they enable the personal encounters, participation in rituals fostering a sense of inclusiveness, that must proliferate as people learn to trust their own instincts for inclusiveness. Interreligious dialogue and collaboration mean working together to establish coalitions among spiritually committed persons in various religious communities, who come together to learn from one another, to share insights into what can be done to reach out to others, to engage ordinary people in the work of discovering the meaning of spiritual transformation and galvanizing their

3 For an outline of *Fratelli Tutti's* teachings about interreligious dialogue, and the path toward genuine "Fraternity," reconciliation, and forgiveness, particularly as it entails metanoia with reference to one's own religious tradition, see McCann, "Discovering the Truth in *Fratelli Tutti*," *Macau Ricci Institute Journal*, Number 8, pp. 44-56.

spiritual energies to collaborate in overcoming the sufferings that prompted the search for a Global Ethic. The Parliaments must be inclusive, providing concrete demonstrations of mutual respect, and genuine efforts to form communities of moral discourse cross-culturally. *Toward a Global Ethic* has itself become a resource for moral education, not just in the quadrennial Parliaments where friends old and new come together to renew each other in spirit, but also in the ongoing efforts, in workshops, in classrooms, in social media. Amazingly, the Declaration has lived on for over 25 years, and still captures the desires and commitments of spiritually serious persons to work together to save us from ourselves.



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