

Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic

Leonard Swidler

I. Rationale

We women and men from various ethical and religious traditions commit ourselves to the following Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic. We speak here not of *ethics* in the plural, which implies rather great detail, but of *ethic* in the singular, i.e., the fundamental attitude toward good and evil, and the basic and middle principles needed to put it into action.

We make this commitment not despite our differences but arising out of our distinct perspectives, recognizing nevertheless in our diverse ethical and religious traditions common convictions that lead us to speak out *against* all forms of inhumanity and *for* humaneness in our treatment of ourselves, one another and the world around us. We find in each of our traditions:

1. grounds in support of universal human rights,
2. a call to work for justice and peace, and
3. concern for conservation of the earth.

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We confirm and applaud the positive human values that are, at times painfully slowly, but nevertheless increasingly, being accepted and advocated in our world: freedom, equality, democracy, recognition of interdependence, commitment to justice and human rights. We also believe that conditions in our world encourage, indeed require, us to look beyond what divides us and to speak as one on matters that are crucial for the survival of and respect for the earth. Therefore we advocate movement toward a global order that reflects the best values found in our myriad traditions.

We are convinced that a just global order can be built only upon a global ethic which clearly states universally-recognized norms and principles, and that such an ethic presumes a readiness and intention on the part of people to act justly - that is, a movement of the heart. Secondly, a global ethic requires a thoughtful presentation of principles that are held up to open investigation and critique - a movement of the head.

Each of our traditions holds commitments beyond what is expressed here, but we find that within our ethical and religious traditions the world community is in the process of discovering elements of a fundamental minimal consensus on ethics which is convincing to all women and men of good will, religious and nonreligious alike, and which will provide us with a moral framework within which we can relate to ourselves, each other and the world in a just and respectful manner.

In order to build a humanity-wide consensus we find it is essential to develop and use a language that is humanity-based, though each religious and ethical tradition also has its own language for what is expressed in this Declaration.

Furthermore, none of our traditions, ethical or religious, is satisfied with minimums, vital as they are; rather, because humans are endlessly self-transcending, our traditions also provide maximums to be

striven for. Consequently, this Declaration does the same. The maximums, however, clearly are ideals to be striven for, and therefore cannot be required, lest the essential freedoms and rights of some thereby be violated.

II. Presuppositions

As a Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic, which we believe must undergird any affirmation of human rights and respect for the earth, this document affirms and supports the rights and corresponding responsibilities enumerated in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. In conjunction with that first United Nations Declaration we believe there are five general presuppositions which are indispensable for a global ethic:

1. Every human possesses inalienable and inviolable dignity; individuals, states, and other social entities are obliged to respect and protect the dignity of each person.

2. No person or social entity exists beyond the scope of morality; everyone - individuals and social organizations - is obliged to do good and avoid evil.

3. Humans are endowed with reason and conscience - the great challenge of being human is to act conscientiously; communities, states and other social organizations are obliged to protect and foster these capabilities.

4. Communities, states and other social organizations which contribute to the good of humans and the world have a right to exist and flourish; this right should be respected by all.

5. Humans are a part of nature, not apart from nature; ethical concerns extend beyond humanity to the rest of the earth, and indeed the cosmos. In brief: this Declaration, in reflection of reality, is not just anthropo-centric, but cosmo-anthropo-centric.

III. A Fundamental Rule

We propose the Golden Rule, which for thousands of years has been affirmed in many religious and ethical traditions, as a fundamental principle upon which to base a global ethic: “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.” This rule should be valid not only for one’s own family, friends, community and nation, but also for all other individuals, families, communities, nations, the entire world, the cosmos.

IV. Basic Principles

1. Because freedom is of the essence of being human, every person is free to exercise and develop every capacity, so long as it does not infringe on the rights of other persons or express a lack of due respect for things living or non-living. In addition, human freedom should be exercised in such a way as to enhance both the freedom of all humans and due respect for all things, living and non-living.

2. Because of their inherent equal dignity, all humans should always be treated as ends, never as mere means. In addition, all humans in every encounter with others should strive to enhance to the fullest the intrinsic dignity of all involved.

3. Although humans have greater intrinsic value than non-humans, all such things, living and non-living, do possess intrinsic value simply because of their existence and, as such, are to be treated with due respect. In addition, all humans in every encounter with non-humans, living and non-living, should strive to respect them to the fullest of their intrinsic value.

4. As humans necessarily seek ever more truth, so too they seek to unite themselves, that is, their “selves,” with what they perceive as

the good: in brief, they love. Usually this “self” is expanded/transcended to include their own family and friends, seeking the good for them. In addition, as with the Golden Rule, this loving/loved “self” needs to continue its natural expansion/transcendence to embrace the community, nation, world, and cosmos.

5. Thus true human love is authentic self-love and other-love co-relatively linked in such a way that ultimately it is drawn to become all-inclusive. This expansive and inclusive nature of love should be recognized as an active principle in personal and global interaction.

6. Those who hold responsibility for others are obliged to help those for whom they hold responsibility. In addition, the Golden Rule implies: If we were in serious difficulty wherein we could not help ourselves, we would want those who could help us to do so, even if they held no responsibility for us; therefore we should help others in serious difficulty who cannot help themselves, even though we hold no responsibility for them.

7. Because all humans are equally entitled to hold their religion or belief - i.e., their explanation of the ultimate meaning of life and how to live accordingly - as true, every human’s religion or belief should be granted its due freedom and respect.

8. In addition, dialogue - i.e., conversation whose *primary* aim is to learn from the other - is a necessary means whereby women and men learn to respect the other, ceaselessly to expand and deepen their own explanation of the meaning of life, and to develop an ever broadening consensus whereby men and women can live together on this globe in an authentically human manner.

V. Middle Principles

The following “Middle Ethical Principles” are in fact those which underlie the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, formally approved by almost every nation in the world.

1. Legal Rights/Responsibilities:

Because all humans have an inherent equal dignity, all should be treated equally before the law and provided with its equal protection.

At the same time, all individuals and communities should follow all just laws, obeying not only the letter but most especially the spirit.

2. Rights/Responsibilities Concerning Conscience and Religion or Belief:

Because humans are thinking, and therefore essentially free-deciding beings, all have the right to freedom of thought, speech, conscience and religion or belief.

At the same time, all humans should exercise their rights of freedom of thought, speech, conscience and religion or belief in ways that will respect themselves and all others and strive to produce maximum benefit, broadly understood, for both themselves and their fellow humans.

3. Rights/Responsibilities Concerning Speech and Information:

Because humans are thinking beings with the ability to perceive reality and express it, all individuals and communities have both the right and the responsibility, as far as possible, to learn the truth and express it honestly.

At the same time everyone should avoid cover-ups, distortions, manipulations of others and inappropriate intrusions into personal privacy; this freedom and responsibility is especially true of the mass media, artists, scientists, politicians and religious leaders.

4. Rights/Responsibilities Concerning Participation in All Decision-making Affecting Oneself or Those for Whom One is Responsible:

Because humans are free-deciding beings, all adults have the right

to a voice, direct or indirect, in all decisions that affect them, including a meaningful participation in choosing their leaders and holding them accountable, as well as the right of equal access to all leadership positions for which their talents qualify them.

At the same time, all humans should strive to exercise their right, and obligation, to participate in self-governance as to produce maximum benefit, widely understood, for both themselves and their fellow humans.

5. Rights/Responsibilities Concerning the Relationship between Women and Men:

Because women and men are inherently equal and all men and women have an equal right to the full development of all their talents as well as the freedom to marry, with equal rights for all women and men in living out or dissolving marriage.

At the same time, all men and women should act toward each other outside of and within marriage in ways that will respect the intrinsic dignity, equality, freedom and responsibilities of themselves and others.

6. Rights/Responsibilities Concerning Property:

Because humans are free, bodily and social in nature, all individual humans and communities have the right to own property of various sorts.

At the same time, society should be so organized that property will be dealt with respectfully, striving to produce maximum benefit not only for the owners but also for their fellow humans, as well as for the world at large.

7. Rights/Responsibilities Concerning Work and Leisure:

Because to lead an authentic human life all humans should normally have both meaningful work and recreative leisure, individuals

and communities should strive to organize society so as to provide these two dimensions of an authentic human life both for themselves and all the members of their communities.

At the same time, all individuals have an obligation to work appropriately for their recompense, and, with all communities, to strive for ever more creative work and re-creative leisure for themselves, their communities, and other individuals and communities.

8. Rights/Responsibilities Concerning Children and Education:

Children are first of all not responsible for their coming into existence or for their socialization and education; their parents are. Where for whatever reason they fail, the wider community, relatives and civil community, have an obligation to provide the most humane care possible, physical, mental, moral/spiritual and social, for children.

Because humans can become authentically human only through education in the broad sense, and today increasingly can flourish only with extensive education in the formal sense, all individuals and communities should strive to provide an education for all children and adult women and men which is directed to the full development of the human person, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, the promotion of understanding, dialogue and friendship among all humans - regardless of racial, ethnic, religious, belief, sexual or other differences - and respect for the earth.

At the same time, all individuals and communities have the obligation to contribute appropriately to providing the means necessary for this education for themselves and their communities, and beyond that to strive to provide the same for all humans.

9. Rights/Responsibilities Concerning Peace:

Because peace as both the absence of violence and the presence of justice for all humans is the necessary condition for the complete development of the full humanity of all humans, individually and

communally, all individuals and communities should strive constantly to further the growth of peace on all levels, personal, interpersonal, local, regional, national and international, granting that

A. the necessary basis of peace is justice for all concerned;

B. violence is to be vigorously avoided, being resorted to only when its absence would cause a greater evil;

C. when peace is ruptured, all efforts should be bent to its rapid restoration - on the necessary basis of justice for all.

At the same time, it should be recognized that peace, like liberty, is a positive value which should be constantly cultivated, and therefore all individuals and communities should make the necessary prior efforts not only to avoid its break-down but also to strengthen its steady development and growth.

10. Rights/Responsibilities Concerning the Preservation of the Environment:

Because things, living and non-living, have an intrinsic value simply because of their existence, and also because humans cannot develop fully as humans, or even survive, if the environment is severely damaged, all individuals and communities should respect the ecosphere within which “we all live, move and have our being,” and act so that

A. nothing, living or non-living, will be destroyed in its natural form except when used for some greater good, as, for example, the use of plants/animals for food;

B. if at all possible, only replaceable material will be destroyed in its natural form.

At the same time, all individuals and communities should constantly be vigilant to protect our fragile universe, particularly from the exploding human population and increasing technological possibilities which threaten it in an ever expanding fashion.