Global Ethic and Human Responsibilities

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Submitted to the High-level Expert Group Meeting on "Human Rights and Human Responsibilities in the Age of Terrorism" 1-2, April 2005, Santa Clara University

1. Global ethic - two declarations

Before going a step further, speaking to you about responsibility on human rights, let me just recall some basic principles of a global ethic:

- Global ethic is not a new ideology or superstructure;

- it will not make the specific ethics of the different religions and philosophies superfluous; it would be ridiculous to consider Global Ethic as a substitute for the Torah, the Sermon on the Mount, the Qur'an, the Bhagavadgita, the Discourses of the Buddha or the Sayings of Confucius.

- Global Ethic is nothing but the **necessary minimum of common values, standards and basic attitudes**. In other words:

- a minimal basic **consensus** relating to binding values, irrevocable standards and moral attitudes, which can be affirmed **by all religions** despite their undeniable dogmatic or theological differences and should also be supported **by non-believers**.

- This consensus of values will be a decisive contribution to **overcome the crisis of orientation**, which became a real global problem.

- Global Ethic is therefore a **project** which needs more than a decade to be fulfilled; it calls for a change of consciousness which has already made great progress in the last decade.

Anyone who is interested in seeing human rights fully respected and more effectively defended throughout the world must surely also be interested in achieving a change of consciousness concerning human obligations or responsibilities. These need to be seen in the context of global challenges and efforts to establish a global ethic, an ethic for humankind. Efforts to establish a global ethic have received widespread international backing in recent years. **Two documents** are of particular relevance:

- On 4 September 1993, for the first time in the history of religion, delegates to the

Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago adopted a "Declaration Toward a Global Ethic".

- On 1 September 1997, again for the first time, the InterAction Council of former heads of state or government called for a global ethic and submitted to the United Nations a proposed "Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities", designed to underpin, reinforce and supplement human rights from an ethical angle.

- In addition, the third Parliament of the World's Religions, held in Cape Town in December 1999 issued "A Call to Our Guiding Institutions", based on the Chicago Declaration.

As for the Parliament of the World's Religions I was also a senior academic adviser to the InterAction Council. I was therefore responsible for the first draft of this Declaration of Human Responsibilities and for incorporating the numerous corrections suggested by the statesmen and the many experts from different continents, religions and disciplines. Therefore I identify completely with this declaration. However, had I not been occupied for years with the problems, and had I not finally written "Global Ethic for Global Politics and Global Economics", published in 1997, which provides a broad treatment of all the problems which arise here, I would not have dared to formulate a first draft at all in close conjunction with the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights and the 1993 Declaration towards a Global Ethic which required a secular political continuation. Such Declarations are therefore not products of naivety but fruits of an intellectual effort. After having recalled the historical and personal context, let me now make some remarks which seem to me fundamental for our topic.

2. Globalization calls for a global ethic

The declaration by the InterAction Council (IAC) is not an isolated document. It responds to the **urgent call by important international bodies** for global ethical standards made in long chapters of the reports both of the UN Commission on Global Governance (1995) and the World Commission on Culture and Development (1995). The same topic has also already been discussed for a long time at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos and similarly in the new UNESCO Universal Ethics Project. Increasing attention is also being paid to it in Asia where they often find it problematic to speak about human rights without speaking at the same time on human responsibilities. Mahatma Gandhi, who was consulted about the UN Declaration of Human Rights, wrote: "The Ganges of rights originates in the Himalayan of responsibilities".

The contemporary background to the questions raised in these international and inter-religious bodies is the fact that the globalization of the economy, the technology and the media has also brought **a globalization of problems**, from the financial and labour markets to ecology and organized crime. If there are to be global solutions to them, they therefore also call for a **globalization of ethic**: no uniform ethical system ("ethics"), but a necessary minimum of shared ethical values, basic attitudes and criteria ("ethic") to which all regions, nations and interest groups can commit themselves. In other words there is a need for a common basic human ethic. **There can be no new world order without a world ethic, a global ethic.**

But please do not misunderstand me: I am pleading for the rediscovery and reassessment of **ethic** in politics and economics. I am all for **morality** (in the positive sense). But at the same time I am **against moralism** (morality in the negative sense). For moralism and moralizing overvalue morality and ask too much of it. Moralizers make morality the sole criterion for human action and ignore the relative independence of various spheres of life like economics, law and politics. As a result they tend to absolutize intrinsically justified norms and values (like peace, justice, environment, life, love) and also to exploit them often for the particular interests of an institution (e.g. a party, church or interest group). Moralism manifests itself in a one-sided and penetrating insistence on particular moral positions (for example, in questions of sexual behaviour, contraception, abortion, euthanasia and similar issues) which makes a rational dialogue with those of other convictions impossible. That is the reason why I fought successfully against mentioning these issues in the two Declarations, because there is no consensus neither among the religions nor within each single religion. Speaking out for a few common ethical standards we therefore do not want to support fundamentalists of any kind nor opportunist politicians who practice the emotive language of today's "therapeutic ethos and politicking".

And all reasonable persons would probably not object: The **law needs a moral foundation**! And security in our cities and communities cannot be bought simply with money nor with more police and prisons. In other words: The ethical acceptance of laws (which provide the state with sanctions and can be imposed by force) is the presupposition of any social culture. What is the use to individual states or organizations, be they the USA, the EU or the United Nations, of constantly new laws, if a significant part of the population or powerful groups or individuals have no intention of observing them? If they find constantly enough ways and means of irresponsibly imposing their own interests? **Quid leges sine moribus**? runs a Roman saying: what are laws without morals?

3. Human responsibilities reinforce human rights

A Declaration of Human Responsibilities **supports and reinforces the Declaration of Human Rights from an ethical perspective**, as is already stated programmatically in the preamble: "We thus... renew and reinforce commitments already proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: namely, the full acceptance of the dignity of all people; their inalienable freedom and equality, and their solidarity with one another." If human rights are not realized in many places where they could be implemented, this is in most cases due to a lack of political and ethical will. There is no disputing the fact that "the rule of law and the promotion of human rights depend on the readiness of men and women to act justly." Nor will any of those who fight for human rights dispute this.

Of course it would be wrong to think that the legal validity of human rights depends on the actual realization of responsibilities. Human rights cannot be considered as a reward for good human behaviour. This would in fact mean that only those who had shown themselves worthy of rights by doing their duty towards society would enjoy rights. Such an absurd idea would clearly offend the unconditional **dignity of the human person**, which is itself a presupposition of both rights and responsibilities. No one has claimed and will claim that certain human responsibilities must be fulfilled first, by individuals or a community, before one can claim human rights. These are given with the human person, but this person is **always at the same time one who has rights**

and responsibilities: All human rights are by definition directly bound up with the responsibility to observe them. Rights and responsibilities can certainly be distinguished neatly, but they cannot be separated from each other. Their relationship needs to be described in a differentiated way. They are not quantities which are to be added or subtracted externally, but **two related dimensions** of being human in the individual and the social sphere.

No rights without responsibilities! As such, this concern is by no means new, but goes back to the "founding period" of human rights. The demand was already made in the debate about human rights in the French Revolutionary Parliament of 1789: If one proclaims a Declaration of Human **Rights** one should combine it with a Declaration of Human **Responsibilities**. Otherwise, in the end everyone would have only rights, which they would play off against one another, and no one would any longer know the responsibilities without which these rights cannot function. Nearly half of the Revolutionary Parliament who voted for the Declaration of Human Rights voted also for a proclamation of human responsibilities. This remained a matter of continuing debate.

And what about us, more than 200 years after the Great Revolution? We in fact live largely in a society in which individual groups all too often insist on **rights against** others without recognizing any **responsibilities** that they themselves have. This is certainly not because of codified human rights as such, but because of certain false developments closely connected with them. In the consciousness of many people these have led to a preponderance of rights over responsibilities. Instead of the culture of human rights which is striven for, there is often an unculture of exaggerated claims to rights which ignores the intentions of human rights. The necessary balance of freedom, equality and fraternity (participation) is not simply given, but has to be realized afresh time and again. After all, we indisputably live in a "society of claims", which often presents itself as a "society of legal claims", indeed as a "society of legal disputes". This makes the state a "judiciary state". Does this not suggest the need for a new concentration on responsibilities, particularly in our over-regulated constitutional states with all their justified insistence on rights?

Despite the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 we still face the reality of severe violations of human rights which spans the world. This shows how much a declaration and explanation of human rights comes up against a void wherever people, particularly those in power, adopt one of the following attitudes to human rights: They ignore them ("What concern is that of mine?"), or neglect them ("I have to represent only the interests of my firm"), or fail to perceive them ("That's what churches and charities are for"), or simply pretend falsely to fulfil them ("We, the government, the board of directors, are doing all we can").

The "weakness of human rights" is in fact not grounded in the concept itself but in the lack of any political and moral will on the part of those responsible for implementing them. To put it plainly: **an ethical impulse and a motivation to accept responsibilities are needed for an effective realization of human rights**. Many human rights champions active on the fronts of this world who confess their "Yes to a Global Ethic" have already explicitly endorsed that point of view. Therefore those who want to work effectively for human rights should welcome a new moral impulse and framework of ethical orientation and not reject it to their own disadvantage.

The **framework of ethical orientation** in the Declaration of Human Responsibilities in some

respects extends beyond human rights. The Declaration of Human Rights does not explicitly raise such a comprehensive moral claim. A Declaration of Human Responsibilities must extend further and begin at a much deeper level. Indeed the two basic principles of the Declaration of Human Responsibilities already offer an ethical orientation of everyday life which is as comprehensive as it is fundamental: the basic demand, **"Every human being must be treated humanely"** and the Golden Rule, **"What you do not wish to be done to yourself, do not do to others"**. Not to mention the concrete requirements of the Declaration of Responsibilities for truthfulness, nonviolence, fairness, solidarity, partnership, etc. Where the Declaration of Human Rights has to leave open what is morally permissible and what is not, the Declaration of Human Responsibilities states this - not as a law but as a moral imperative.

Like the Declaration of Human Rights, the Declaration of Human Responsibilities is indeed primarily a **moral appeal**. As such it does not have the direct binding character of international law, but it proclaims to the world public some basic norms for collective and individual behaviour which should apply to everyone. This appeal is, of course, also meant to have an effect on legal and political practice. However, it does not aim at any legalistic morality. A key feature of the Declaration of Human Responsibilities is that it precisely **does not aim at legal codification**, which is impossible anyway in the case of moral attitudes like truthfulness or fairness. It aims at **voluntarily taking responsibility**. The Declaration of Human Responsibilities should therefore be considered as **morally** rather than **legally** binding.

We need not worry: **morality and community** cannot be "prescribed" as obligations. And the best guarantee of peace is in fact a functioning state which guarantees the rule of the law for its citizens. But precisely because community and morality cannot be prescribed, the personal responsibility of its citizens is indispensable. The democratic state in a pluralistic society is dependent on a consensus on values, norms and responsibilities, precisely because it cannot create this consensus nor prescribe it.

Those concerned with human rights in particular should know that the **Declaration of Human Rights itself, in Article 29**, contains a definition of the "duties of everyone towards the community". From this it follows with compelling logic that a Declaration of Human Responsibilities cannot in any way stand in contradiction to the Declaration of Human Rights. And if concrete forms of political, social and cultural articles on human rights were possible and necessary through international covenants in the 1960s, a development of Article 29 by an extended formulation of these responsibilities in the 1990s cannot be illegitimate. On the contrary, precisely in the light of this it becomes clear that human rights and human responsibilities **do not mutually restrict** each other for society **but supplement each other in a fruitful way** — and all champions of human rights should recognize this as a reinforcement of their position and their struggle. It is no accident that this Article 29 speaks of the "just requirements of morality, public order and general welfare in a democratic society".

Conclusion

The Global Ethic Project is an ongoing process. It has made tremendous progress in a very short period of time.

The Proposal of the InterAction Council should be used as a basis of discussion also in the relevant circles of the UN system and within the NGO family. Of course, as it was the case with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights the debate on a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities would first manifest various divergent points of view. But such a debate is necessary and, I am sure, it would ultimately not be divisive, but would raise the awareness of the importance of global ethical standards in the age of globalization.

The search for a global ethic which finds its expression in both human rights and human responsibilities — would indeed constitute what the UN General Assembly calls a "collective endeavour — of the international community to enhance understanding through constructive dialogue among civilizations on the threshold of the third millennium".

Let me sum up **my very realistic vision** in three phrases:

- There will be no survival of our globe without a global ethic:
- There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions.
- There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue and cooperation among the religions and civilizations.

Literature on Global Ethic

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