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A Global Ethic Institute in China

Keynote Speech

Hans Küng

This is a day of great joy for me, for the delegation from Tübingen University and for all our friends at Peking University, especially for my colleague and friend Tu Weiming. He will remember that exactly three years ago, on November 2nd, 2009 at his Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies we had a two-hours dialogue on Chinese culture, which was recorded as a film. The same day, in the great hall of Beida, I gave a lecture in which I presented the manifesto of our Global Ethic Foundation »Global Economic Ethic. Consequences for Global Businesses«, which I had presented before in New York, Basel, and Melbourne. This manifesto had been drafted by a working group of business people, economists, and ethicists, of which our friend Karl Schlecht was a very active member.

At the same occasion in 2009, Tu Weiming and I reached a first agreement on the co-operation between this Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies and our Global Ethic Foundation. We had already some funds from the Global Ethic Foundation in Switzerland at our disposal. But it was of course a decisive step forward, when Karl Schlecht, the ingenious engineer and a great benefactor of our Foundation, promised to sponsor a Global Ethic Institute at the University of Tübingen.

So we were able to establish on 18 April 2012 the Global Ethic Institute at the University of Tübingen. And we were happy that a delegation of Peking University led by President Zhou Qifeng was able to be present on this day in Tübingen. It was the day on which another great personality, Mr. Liang Wengen, President of SANY Group, promised us in a joint meeting that he would sponsor, together with Karl Schlecht, a parallel Institute of Global Ethic at Peking University.

All this is the reason why we from Tübingen came also with a small delegation to Beijing: the Secretary General of our Global Ethic Foundation, Dr. Stephan Schlenzog and the director of the Global Ethic Institute at the University of Tübingen, Prof. Claus Dierksmeier. They are both very eager to cooperate with their colleagues at Beida (please stand up).

These two institutes will become a precious element in the strategic partnership between Peking University and Tübingen University. This was appreciated already some time ago by President Zhou Qifeng and President Bernd Engler of Tübingen University. All partners agreed on a Memorandum of Understanding on July 16, 2012 and in October 2012 also on an Agreement, which are the guidelines for both sides.

I am of course most happy personally because amidst of the momentous upheavals of the years 1989/90 no one could have foretold what would happen to my slim book with its ambitious title in German »Projekt Weltethos« (in the English edition »Global Responsibility. In Search of a New World Ethic«). For me from the very beginning Global Ethic and World Ethic have been synonyms. But we distinguished between global ethic, which means the inner moral attitude and conviction, and global ethics, which means the doctrines or systems of ethic, e.g. of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas or Immanuel Kant. The message for a Global Ethic was clear right from the start and has continued to become even clearer and more tangible in the quarter century that has since passed:

»No peace among nations without peace between religions.

No peace between religions without dialogue between religions.

No dialogue between religions without shared ethical values and standards.«

The Global Ethic strives for peace between religions, cultures, and nations based on certain, jointly held, fundamental ethical values, standards and attitudes. Over a period of more than two decades its timeliness has continually increased as has the support for the project. Indeed, the concept of a global ethic is currently booming – not merely because of the global financial and economic crisis. The reasons and lines of argumentation, which in the first phase derived primarily from the world religions and from philosophy, have since then been confirmed and strengthened by information from many different disciplines. Nevertheless, the project has continued to remain a living and open process, right up to the present day. It is a sign of its vitality that it continues to tackle – creatively I hope – new questions arising from cultural, social, and religious developments.



Global ethic as an opportunity

People's thoughts and actions – in politics, the economy, education and training, even in culture and sports – are increasingly being played out against a global horizon; for this reason an ethical orientation which also has a global dimension is more necessary than ever. We read and hear on an almost daily basis in the media about various crises and their moral preconditions or consequences all over the globe.

One question is often asked: Which crisis is the most dangerous one? My answer: the most dangerous crisis is the *current accumulation of global crises*. We live in a time

where several fundamental *crises are influencing and reinforcing* one another. Fukushima is a symbol of how an earthquake, a tsunami, and technical and political failure can escalate and reinforce each other and lead to a catastrophe. We are witnessing the emergence of climate crises and energy crises, financial crises and economic crises, debt crises and national crises. None of these crises are natural catastrophes, they are man-made.

But there is no universal remedy which could help us resolve individual crises or all of these crises together. Of course, a global ethic cannot offer a pre-packaged solution to all of these problems in the sense of providing a recipe for success. But the concept of a global ethic is at least an effective attempt at finding answers, as it offers an *ethical frame of reference* (globally and domestically) and a *moral compass* in the crises of our globalised world, which may be helpful in all areas of life, in matters big and small, to both young and old.

All of these crises have always also had an *ethical dimension*. And all attempts to find solutions will fall short as long as efforts are not focused at the level of ethics, at changing the inner attitudes of the stakeholders and decision-makers, at working towards a change in attitudes, at attempting a return to responsibility and basic ethical standards.

Democratic and ethical values

Values such as »Freedom, Equality and Brotherhood« which emanated in and spread from Europe and wonderful achievements such as democracy, human rights and tolerance would be more easily accepted globally if they were underpinned by ethical values such as humanity und humane standards.

The Global Ethic Project's charter and founding document is the »*Declaration toward a Global Ethic*« issued by the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago on September 4, 1993. This Declaration clearly formulates the principles and directives of a

global ethic based on the great religious and ethical traditions of humanity and re-stated for our modern times which can be supported by believers and non-believers.

- The two *basic principles*:

The *Principle of Humanity*: »Every human being must be treated humanely and not inhumanely.«

The *Golden Rule of Reciprocity*: »Do unto others what you would have others do unto you.«

These two principles are deeply rooted in Chinese ethics. Already Confucius underlines the importance of Humanity (ren) and Reciprocity (shu).

- The Global Ethic Declaration goes on with the *Four Directives or Imperatives of Humanity*:

A culture of *non-violence* and of *respect for all life*: »You shall not kill – but you shall also not torture, torment, or hurt« – or to put it positively: »Have respect for life!«

A culture of *solidarity* and a *just economic order*: »You shall not steal – but you shall also not exploit, bribe, corrupt« – or to put it positively: »Act honestly and fairly!«

A culture of *tolerance* and a life of *truthfulness*: »You shall not lie – but you shall also not deceive, falsify, manipulate« – or to put it positively: »Speak and act truthfully!«

A culture of *equal rights* and *partnership between men and women*: »You shall not abuse sexuality – but you shall also not abuse, humiliate or degrade your partner« – or to put it positively: »Respect and love one another!«

These ethical standards have developed ever since humankind grew out of the animal world.

Already in the 1990ies various international conferences and initiatives stressed the necessity for global ethical standards. The UN Commission on Global Governance (1995) emphasized the importance of human rights accompanied by human responsibilities. The World Commission on Culture and Development (1995) demanded, over and above the promotion of economic growth, an investment into human development. Finally there was the proposal by the InterAction Council, a »club« of

former heads of state and government, for a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities (1997). All these institutions and their moral appeals were reacting against certain global developments and trends:

- the radically changed international geopolitical reality coupled with the ineffectual proclamation of a »new world order«;
- widespread, serious problems with regard to the environment, the population explosion, energy shortages ...;
- the increasing trend towards ethnic conflicts and the threat of a clash of cultures at local and regional levels;
- the global interconnectedness which has arisen from developments in communication technologies with their many positive but sometimes also negative sides;
- the challenges and opportunities of multicultural societies, which nowadays are present not merely in big cities but also in rural areas.

The principles and directives of a Global Ethic were confirmed by the two conferences on »Traditional Chinese Ethics and a Global Ethic« held in Beijing in 1997 and 2001.

Human responsibilities strengthen human rights

In its first chapter, the Declaration Toward a Global Ethic of the Parliament of the World's Religions (Chicago, 4 September 1993) already affirmed the fundamental importance of human rights: »We are convinced of the fundamental unity of the human family on Earth. We recall the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. What it formally proclaimed on the level of rights we wish to confirm and deepen here from the perspective of an ethic: The full realization of the intrinsic dignity of the human person, the inalienable freedom and equality in principle of all humans, and the necessary solidarity and interdependence of all humans with each other.« But the Declaration also emphasises »that actions in favour of rights and freedoms presume a consciousness of responsibility and duty, and that therefore both the minds and hearts of women and men must be addressed«.

In this point the Declaration toward a Global Ethic is in agreement with Article 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that states explicitly that »everyone has duties to the community«. The article also refers to »the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society«. These considerations were the inspiration for the formulation of the above-mentioned Declaration of Human Responsibilities proposed by the InterAction Council. It is thus clear that human rights and human responsibilities towards society in general *do not limit each other but fruitfully complement each other*.

Obviously, the legal application of human rights must not depend in any way on the performance of duties. This would imply that rights are only due to those persons who have shown themselves to be worthy of them through the fulfilment of their duties towards society. But this would clearly violate the unconditional *dignity of the human person*, which in its turn is a pre-condition for both rights and duties.

A common basis despite diversity

A global ethic demands that cultural and religious diversity must be respected and thus the different legislations and laws in different countries and regions must also be respected, as long as they do not run contradictory to universal human rights. But despite all the cultural and religious diversity, a global ethic draws particular attention to ethical commonalities. Everyone together bears responsibility for society and mankind. And this poses the challenge of establishing a common moral basis as a basis for decisions and actions: not a complex ethical system but a system which nonetheless consists of a *few, generally accepted, elementary, ethical key norms*.

A global ethic is thus a transcultural central idea which can serve as the basis for a pluralistic and often multicultural society. A global ethic assumes, as a matter of course, that the contextual roots of and justifications for ethical principles, values and standards differ. The justification of a global ethic is by no means limited to religious options. Instead, a global ethic is an appeal - an inclusive appeal - to commit to ethical values and standards: an appeal which is directed at believers and non-believers,

at religious and non-religious persons alike. No one is excepted from this appeal, not even those who are making the appeal.

And the relevance of the idea of a global ethic for different areas of society is becoming increasingly evident:

- in *education*: as the mix of pupils in classes becomes increasingly ethnically diverse, while at the same time a basic ethical orientation is increasingly expected;
- in *politics*: nationally, politics depend on a foundation of shared basic values, particularly in times of deep-seated change, not least because social cohesion must be preserved by a balance of freedoms and responsibilities;
- in the *economy*: in an age of globalisation the economy must offer proof of its dependability by its commitment to elementary ethical standards, not merely within a company in the form of a company ethical code (business culture, code of conduct) or in business relations where economic capital and trust matter, but quite fundamentally in helping to shape our globalised economy.
- and finally in *international relationships*: agreeing to a basic humane ethic can have a lasting impact for peace between people in the different areas of the world.

Let me summarize:

(1) *The Global Ethic Project is not an explicitly religious project, it is a project based on a general ethic. The Global Ethic Project can and should be supported by religious and non-religious persons alike. Philosophical justifications are equally possible as are theological arguments, or reasoning based on the study of religions.*

(2) *A global ethic is not merely an ethic for individuals; it applies at all times to all persons and institutions. The Declaration toward a Global Ethic proclaimed in 1993 in Chicago expresses »what the fundamental elements of a global ethic for mankind should be – for individuals as well as for communities and organizations, for states as well as for the religions themselves.«*

(3) *The Global Ethic Project does not aim to create a unified and uniform religion but strives for peace between the religions.* A unity of the Christian churches would be possible if it was not blocked and thwarted by the governing bodies of some churches because they wish to maintain their power; all Christian churches have a shared foundation through their common belief in Jesus Christ. But such a shared foundation of belief is lacking among the big world religions, and the aim must be not to strive for a unity of the religions but to strive for peace, dialogue, co-operation between them.

I come to my conclusion. It was, believe it or not, exactly 33 years ago when I visited Beida for the first time: I was a member of a delegation of the Kennedy Institute of Ethics in Washington DC. And now, as far as anyone can judge, it will be my last participation in a great event in Beijing. But in China it is needless to say that a book is sometimes more important than the person. I leave you therefore my written legacy: I am most happy to present you with the Chinese version of the new Global Ethic Handbook, which has arrived from the printer right today. I am grateful to Sanlian Publishing House and to Professor Yang Xusheng who cared so well for this Chinese edition. I am offering the first three copies to President Zhou, to my friend Professor Tu Weiming, and to the generous Chinese sponsor of the Institute, Liang Wengen. I am sure that the content of this Handbook will be an excellent basis for the work of the new World Ethics Institute at Peking University, and I wish the Institute a good start. Thank you.