

## Religion and Values: Cosmic or Universal Ethics?<sup>1</sup>

By Gordon Arthur

### Abstract

In this paper, I examine the global ethics produced by the Swiss ecumenical theologian, Hans Küng, and subsequently adopted at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1993. I then explore the critique of this document by the American Jesuit scholar, Vernon Ruland. Next, I examine an objection to this programme made by Zhai Zhenming, who is a philosopher at Zhongshan University in south-eastern China and appears to be an atheist. Finally, I explain how I think this relates to the view expressed by Bob Krone in the inaugural issue of this journal that “the Philosophy for the Space Age should be ‘Reverence for Life within Ethical Civilization’.”<sup>2</sup> In the process, I hope to explore the basis for an agreed ethic that can be used as a foundation for moral behaviour and to clarify whether this basis can better be developed as a global (or perhaps better, cosmic) ethic or a universal ethic.

**Keywords:** cosmic ethic, global ethic, universal ethic, Hans Küng, World Parliament of Religions.

### Cosmic Ethics and Universal Ethics

First I must explain the difference between a cosmic ethic and a universal ethic. A cosmic ethic, based on an agreement on certain principles governing behaviour by people everywhere, is an ethic that can be used everywhere in the world or in space. A universal ethic, by contrast, is an ethic that is based on practical reasoning and it can be applied in many situations. This is what the ancient Greek philosophers were trying to produce; yet Plato’s ethics are different from Aristotle’s and both are different from either Stoic or Epicurean ethics. Thus, while a cosmic ethic may also be a universal ethic, it need not be. Similarly, universal ethics may not be cosmic in scope. With this in mind, let us begin with Hans Küng.

### Hans Küng

Küng’s first major attempt to produce a global ethic came in his 1990 book, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*.<sup>3</sup> In it, he identifies five basic commands that hold in all the world’s religions. These are *do not kill*, *do not lie*, *do not steal*, *do not practise immorality*, and *have respect for parents and love for children*. While these may seem rather general commandments, Küng applies them very broadly, applying the prohibition on stealing to a variety of forms of corruption, for example. He sees them as protection against unprincipled libertinism, but is also clear that they must not be applied legalistically. Instead, he seeks a middle way, which avoids either extreme. He also

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper entitled “Religion and Worldwide Values: Global or Universal Ethics?” presented at a symposium on globalization at Seattle Pacific University on May 19, 2007. However, the principles explored in this paper apply equally well to humanity in space.

<sup>2</sup> Bob Krone, “Philosophy for Space: Learning from the Past – Visions for the Future,” *Journal of Space Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 23.

<sup>3</sup> (London: SCM, 1990).

points out that ethics is neither a form of dogma nor a set of tactics: what is moral is not just what is good or right in the abstract, but what is good or right in the particular circumstances surrounding a moral choice. He summarises these ideas in the Golden Rule: negatively, do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you and positively, treat others as you would like to be treated. However, Küng also points out that religions have often failed to live up to their principles, citing such problems as the prohibition of contraception by the Roman Catholic Church (we might add the problem of authoritarian forms of leadership in some Protestant Churches), the treatment of women, dissidents, and non-Muslims by Islamic extremists, and the continuing support for the caste system in some sections of Hinduism.

Küng distils six requirements for a global ethics of the twenty-first century:

Freedom is required, but so is justice: all must have equal rights and responsibilities and live in solidarity with each other.

Equality is needed, but also plurality: a way must be found to a reconciled multiplicity of cultures, traditions, and peoples worldwide.

Brotherhood is needed, but also sisterhood: a way must be found to a renewed community in which women and men bear equal shares of responsibility and in which each can freely contribute his or her gifts, insights, values, and experiences.

Coexistence is needed, but also peace: a way must be found to a society in which peacemaking as a means of resolving conflicts is given a much higher priority than it is now.

Productivity is needed, but also solidarity with the environment: humanity must learn to live in balance with other creatures and to stop damaging the environment.

Toleration is needed, but also ecumenism: divisions within the religions need to be overcome, religious freedom needs to be permitted, and mistrust and enmity between religious groups need to be overcome.

These requirements, however, are the moral minimum. Documents such as the Torah, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Quran offer a maximal ethic, which can never be replaced by such a declaration.<sup>4</sup>

By 1993, these six principles had been reduced to four and they were endorsed by the Assembly of Religious Leaders at the second Parliament of the World's Religions.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter VI. In this section I am developing Küng's argument slightly, as in 1990 his language was not as inclusive as it might have been and there is also evidence of a certain Eurocentricity in his argument.

Principle 1 is a commitment to a culture of non-violence and a respect for life. This has its roots in the commandment, *do not kill*, but it is expressed in the positive form, *have respect for life*. All have the right to life; no one has the right to torture, injure, or kill anyone else. No one has the right to discriminate against minorities. Conflicts must be resolved without violence and in a framework of justice and this applies to states as well as individuals. Those with political power must work within a just world order to find the most peaceful and non-violent solution available. Human life must be protected, but so must animal and plant life. In an interdependent world, we cannot afford to destroy the natural world: we must live in harmony with it. When it comes to moral behaviour, everyone must learn that violence is not a viable way to settle differences with others. Only in this way can a culture of non-violence be developed.

Principle 2 is a commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order. This has its roots in the commandment, *do not steal*, but it is expressed in the positive form, *deal honestly and fairly*. No one has the right to rob or dispossess anyone of anything. No one may use his or her possessions without concern for the needs of society and the Earth. Extremes of poverty amid great wealth, ruthlessly accumulated, must be avoided, as these conditions are fertile breeding grounds for envy, rebellion, and deadly hatred, often leading to a vicious circle of violence and counter-violence. The only solution to this is a just economic order, in which the worldwide debt crisis is resolved and consumption of resources is restrained wherever it is not socially beneficial. Instead, we must utilise economic and political power in service to humanity. Rather than misusing it in ruthless battles for domination, we must cultivate mutual respect and consideration to reach a reasonable balance of interests and we must value a sense of moderation and modesty instead of an unquenchable greed. When it comes to moral behaviour, everyone must learn that property, even if it is limited, carries responsibilities as well as rights and that its uses should serve the common good as well as the interests of its owner. Only in this way can a just economic order be developed.

Principle 3 is a commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness. This has its roots in the commandment, *do not lie*, but it is expressed in the positive form, *speak and act truthfully*. No person or institution has the right to lie to others. This is especially true for those who work in the mass media, artists, writers and scientists, politicians, and representatives of religions, who have a duty to respect human dignity, to observe proper ethical standards, and to refrain from deliberate distortions of the truth, intruding into the privacy of others, manipulation, or stirring up prejudice or hatred. However, we must not confuse freedom with arbitrariness or pluralism with indifference to the truth. We must cultivate truthfulness in all our relationships and we must constantly seek and serve the truth with sincerity, avoiding half-truths and opportunism. When it comes to moral behaviour, everyone must learn to be truthful and to exercise critical judgement to discern when opinions are presented as facts, interests are concealed, or the truth is exaggerated or distorted.

Principle 4 is a commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women. This has its roots in the commandment, *do not commit sexual immorality*, but it is expressed in the positive form, *respect and love one another*. No one has the

right to degrade others, treating them as mere sex objects, or to lead them into or hold them in sexual dependency. No one should face sexual exploitation or discrimination. The relationship between men and women should be rooted in love, not patronising behaviour or exploitation. Human fulfilment is not the same as sexual pleasure and sexuality should express and reinforce a loving relationship lived by equal partners. The social institution of marriage provides security for the whole family and all societies are encouraged to develop economic and social conditions in which marriage can flourish. Children are entitled to access to education and there should be no exploitation, either of children by parents or parents by children. When it comes to moral behaviour, everyone must learn that sexuality is creative and affirming, not a negative, destructive, or exploitative force. It can only be effective in shaping community when partners accept the responsibilities of caring for each other's happiness.<sup>5</sup>

### **Vernon Ruland**

In his *Conscience Across Borders: An Ethics of Global Rights and Religious Pluralism*,<sup>6</sup> Vernon Ruland discusses Küng's ethic and the Parliament in his chapter on human rights and religious pluralism. He tells us that the Assembly of Religious Leaders at the Parliament of the World's Religions was given Küng's draft along with a set of procedures that allowed a week's discussion of the text, but no changes to it. This immediately prompted questions as to whether the draft was being imposed, why Küng was selected as the author of the text, whom he had consulted in drawing it up, and how the other religious leaders had been selected.<sup>7</sup> Ruland tells us that Farid Esack, a Muslim scholar-activist specialising in South Africa, objected to the strict pacifism of the text, which he saw as a rejection of self-defence, even for oppressed people, and a recurring emphasis on what he saw as privatised reformation, in which changes in individuals must precede changes in socio-economic structures, rather than occurring simultaneously. All these objections seem to me (and to Ruland) to be well founded. Ruland adds that some of his students saw the text as a distillation of religious moral imperatives into a few platitudes, sometimes merely rehashing the UN Bill of Rights. It avoids tough issues such as the rights of unborn humans and the restrictions in some Churches on women's ministry.

Despite these problems, Ruland is broadly supportive of Küng's position. Ruland points out that Küng has issued rebuttals of the claims against him and has argued that ethics do not simply list rights, but include moral ideals and duties. While the UN Bill of Rights is addressed to sovereign nation-states and their citizens, the global ethic is addressed to the religious and ethical leaders of the world and their adherents. Küng believes that the ethic underpins the Bill of Rights and that the religious traditions must play their part in ensuring the Bill of Rights is not violated.

Ruland particularly praises three features of the global ethic. First, he sees it as a clear, accurate summary of the moral common ground already shared by the major religious

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<sup>5</sup> See [www.cpwr.org/resource/ethic.pdf](http://www.cpwr.org/resource/ethic.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> (San Francisco: University of San Francisco, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> I would suspect Küng was chosen because at the time he had done the work and published it and no one else had published anything similar.

traditions. He sees the ethic as being uncovered within these traditions, not imposed from outside, and spelled out in a graphic context of current drug peddling, torture, sexual abuse, destruction of the environment, and world debt. It identifies an ethical agenda for the future while declaring an ethical consensus rooted in the past, centred on the golden rule, now expressed as *treat every human being humanely*. A human being must always be the subject of rights and not an object of commercialisation for the benefit of the economy, politicians, the media, research institutes, or businesses.

Second, Ruland praises its forthright distinction between minimal and maximal ethics. He points out that some zealous moral humanists have tried to inflate the UN Bill of Rights into a comprehensive secular ethics, something it was never intended to be, and approves the fact that the text rules out such an interpretation. K ung's guiding principle, he tells us, was to avoid matters on which there is no consensus, while still expressing the consequences of the ethical maxims clearly and concretely, even if this made uncomfortable reading for certain religious communities.

Third, Ruland commends the ethic's ability to spark self-criticism within the religious traditions and thereby to induce them to admit their own failings without making exclusive claims to the moral high ground. The most harmful failing, he tells us, is to dismiss other religions as of little value, stirring up prejudice, hatred, and enmity towards other religious communities. The global ethic, he adds, counteracts relativism without replacing it with absolutism and he sees its main value in moderating these extremes. It says to relativists that absolute values exist and to absolutists that no one group has a monopoly on the truth.

### **Zhai Zhenming**

Zhai Zhenming, by contrast, is rather less sympathetic to K ung. His concern is twofold. First, he is concerned that Chinese ethicists in particular are confusing a global ethic with a universal ethic. He is less aware of this in the West, although there is in fact some evidence of just such a confusion in Ruland's work. Second, he is concerned to demonstrate that an appeal to religion as a ground for ethics leads either to dogmatism or to relativism, despite the assertions to the contrary of those involved in framing the global ethic.

Zhai points out that philosophers have traditionally believed that human rationality is a possible ground for a final verdict in moral matters. Given a collection of alleged moral rules, the valid ones can be separated from invalid ones by the methodical use of reason. Universal ethics are not a matter of consensus, Zhai tells us, but a matter of self-evident necessity. Yet the fact remains that when people make supposedly universal ethical claims, they often fail to reach universal agreement.

Does this mean that it is impossible to reach a universal ethic? Zhai does not think so, but he accepts that there is, at this stage, no agreed universal ethic. Despite this lack of agreement, he believes the problems of a global ethic are even worse. Since it is based on a supposed consensus of views, arrived at through inductive investigation rather than rational deduction, it is more subjective than a universal ethic and its writers must

assume in advance that they know what is good and what is evil before the deductive process begins. Zhai suggests that if such a consensus already exists, there is no need to make the declaration and if it does not, making the declaration will not bring it about. Nevertheless, he does find the enterprise commendable, even if he does not agree with all its content. However, he neglects the possibility that the consensus has existed for some time, but that the friction and strife between different religious groups has resulted in a lack of communication and therefore a lack of awareness among their adherents of their shared values, a situation I believe to be the case.<sup>8</sup>

Zhai's main objection, however, is that the ethic treats its principles as commands of God. He accepts the global ethic's call for honesty and applies it in the Socratic sense, that if there is insufficient reason to believe something, we should acknowledge our ignorance. From this he concludes that since in his view there are no rational grounds for believing in God, the global ethic is intellectually dishonest, as the rule of honesty appears to conflict with faith-based religious practice. Had the framers of the ethic been atheists this charge might have had some merit, but since they, along with philosophers from Anselm to Plantinga, believed they had adequate rational grounds for asserting the existence of God, it seems unjust. Furthermore, Socrates was not an atheist, even though he was condemned for impiety, so it is unlikely he would recognise this use of his maxim.

Zhai adds that if things are good because God commands them, God's power and freedom are established, but not God's benevolence and if God commands things because they are good, God cannot be the final explanation of the source of goodness and value. In either event, God, and therefore religion, cannot account for the possible validity of an ethic. However, the same dilemma arises whenever an extra-rational authority is advanced as the ground of an ethic, be it the sage king, tradition, the written text, or the legal system: there are many possible sources of authority. This multiplicity of sources seems to lead either to dogmatism or to relativism. To pick one authority and disregard the others would be dogmatism: this ethic is correct and the others are not. To acknowledge that more than one authority has validity would be relativism: this ethic is correct for me; other ethics may be correct for others. Thus, Zhai concludes, while a global ethic such as the one we have discussed may promote a better world order, it cannot form the basis for a universal ethic.<sup>9</sup>

However, this charge can be turned. Since there are a variety of alleged universal ethics, all derived from supposedly objective reason, those seeking to live ethically must either pick one of the existing ethics or develop their own. If Zhai's charge is correct, it would seem to follow that since there is more than one ethic available, to pick one ethic and disregard the others would also be dogmatism and to acknowledge that more than one ethic has validity would also be relativism, which leaves him in the same boat as the rest of us: our intellectual foundations, even if well-founded, are not totally secure. We might also note that both Plato and Aristotle offered rational grounds for disposing

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<sup>8</sup> When dealing with a universal ethic, however, he does allow the possibility that such an ethic has been developed, but not recognised.

<sup>9</sup> See [philosophy.zsu.edu.cn/info\\_Show.asp?ArticleID=336](http://philosophy.zsu.edu.cn/info_Show.asp?ArticleID=336).

of disabled babies,<sup>10</sup> a position that would be considered both irrational and morally repugnant today. This indicates that even secular ethics are not simply based on reason, but take into account other factors as well and so religious grounds for a system of ethics are not logically ruled out. Nevertheless, Zhai seems correct that to establish a system of ethics solely on the basis of a popular consensus, without any rational underpinning, would be inadequate.

### **Reverence for Life within Ethical Civilization**

Krone's philosophy of reverence for life within ethical civilization has three components:

- 1) Reverence for life is the foundational purpose that will sustain humankind in perpetuity.
- 2) Ethical civilization will be the environment facilitating that end.
- 3) The Policy Sciences hold the solutions for creating ethical and successful civilizations.<sup>11</sup>

This article is relevant to the first two components. Reverence for life is clearly at the heart of Küng's ethic and it is also clearly designed to bring about ethical civilization. The main question is to what extent does it provide a foundation for doing so?

Küng's fourth requirement and first principle, coexistence and peace and non-violence and a respect for life respectively, explicitly address Component 1, but they do not appear to take full account of the reality that not everyone is interested in peace. Consequently, as Esack pointed out, there may be circumstances where one may be forced to choose between defending oneself against an aggressor or risking being killed. A more developed form of this requirement and principle might encourage the creation of circumstances in which the economic cost of such aggression would outweigh any possible benefits and thereby discourage those who might otherwise resort to war.

Achieving this would also entail substantial progress towards Küng's second principle and fifth requirement: solidarity between people and a just economic order (productivity and solidarity). Such an economic order, in my opinion, will need to be based on something other than capitalism or socialism in anything like their current forms. I would further submit that a move from cost- to value-based economics (which is likely to involve some radical changes in priorities) will be an essential part of achieving this.

The other four requirements (freedom and justice; equality and plurality; brotherhood and sisterhood; toleration and ecumenism) and the third and fourth principles (a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness; equal rights and partnership between men and women) are more obviously relevant to Component 2.

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<sup>10</sup> See Plato, *Republic* (London: Penguin, 1987), Book V, Section 2 and Aristotle, *Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Book VII, Section 16.

<sup>11</sup> Krone, "Philosophy for Space," 17-18.

Some seem to be two sides of the same coin (it is not clear how one can have freedom without justice, brotherhood without sisterhood, or equal rights without partnership) and all seek to advance ethical civilization and to balance the rights and responsibilities of everyone in a commendable manner.

It is perhaps less obvious what is necessary to bring them about, but this may become clearer if progress towards peace and economic justice can be achieved. However, Küng's ethic creates a favourable impression, despite its shortcomings, and it seems to be a good foundation for a cosmic ethic.

### **Conclusion**

It seems to me that Vernon Ruland's assessment of Küng's ethic is pretty close to the mark. While I do not share Küng's strict pacifism, I applaud the both/and thinking his work expresses, which is in marked contrast to the either/or thinking that so often characterises Western thought. I do not, however, share the assessment of Ruland's students that the text contains mere platitudes. It may not be very precise, but I think it has substance nevertheless and that it can provide a solid agenda for moral behaviour, an agenda the text explicitly spells out. While I strongly disagree with much of what Zhai Zhenming says, I acknowledge his point that a popular consensus is inadequate grounding for a universal ethic and I think the same point can be applied to a global or cosmic ethic. I think that Küng's work provides a good foundation for a cosmic ethic, but that it also needs to be developed into a universal ethic. This will involve a deeper analysis of the reasons for the moral consensus behind the ethic and it is likely to take some time. This work still needs to be done, but once it is completed, I think Küng's work will be greatly strengthened by it. If his global ethic can be made universal, it is also likely to command a wider consensus than would be expected of a purely religious ethic.

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**About the Author:** Gordon Arthur is the author of *Law, Liberty and Church: Authority and Justice in the Major Churches in England* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2006); "The Development of Canonical Jurisprudence in the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England", *Ecclesiology* 4 (2008): 308-25, and *On Frustrated Vocation* (Ilford: FeedARead, 2012) He gained a BSc in Physics from Birmingham University in 1984, an MA in Philosophy of Religion from King's College, London in 1998, and a PhD in theology, also from King's College, London in 2004. Gordon is Associate Editor of the *Journal of Space Philosophy*.



**Editor's Notes:** I thank my *Journal of Space Philosophy* colleague, Dr. Gordon Arthur for this excellent research into Cosmic Ethics and Universal Ethics and its link to our 2012 Kepler Space Institute proposal for a Space Philosophy. Dr. Arthur has been an active member of our Space Faith Team of theologians working on the hypothesis that general agreement for Space Philosophy and a code of ethical behaviour can be created as part of Space settlement planning. **Bob Krone.**