

***FOUR LANDMARK STATEMENTS OF GLOBAL ETHICS AS RESOURCES FOR SHARED VISION*¹**

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GLOBAL CITIZENS PURSUING A JUST, PEACEABLE, INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE FUTURE
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Session One: Global Ethics and Global Citizens

Panel: “Ethical and Global Citizens: Not Whether, but How?” – How do we bring together world leaders: political, religious, activist, and others on a common ground for Global Ethics? As global citizens, we have a responsibility to work with others across diverse traditions and cultures to form common bonds and a shared vision. For example, we have the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. While this is laudable as a declaration, what additional resources are needed to bring together people in community and action? Where the focus may differ (justice, religious harmony, climate change, etc.), how can we harness the synergy of global community to empower one another? How can we gather locally to act globally?

What Is Global Ethics?

What is global ethics? Ethics is a human universal. All human cultures distinguish right from wrong and recognize in their worldviews the difference between good and evil. Also, all human societies have teachings guiding action in terms of moral values: affirming the norm of reciprocity, calling for kindness and doing good to others, and forbidding wanton violence and harm. The existence of shared moral norms in the world's culture has been confirmed by extensive historical and social scientific research.² As well, the idea of a common humanity or "human family" is present in virtually all religious and philosophical traditions from ancient times, as is the notion that certain moral norms, though not all, apply to all persons regardless of their group or station in life.³ This knowledge makes possible the establishment of a "global ethic" in various expressions. It also strengthens the hope that the values of a global ethic may be realized concretely and manifested in action.

A global ethic is one that seeks to be authoritative for a global community. Universal in intent, it sets forth the obligations of 'global citizenship'.⁴ It is not a consensus in the minimal sense of a pragmatic compact based on mutual self-interest, but rather an aspirational agreement on 'what is best in us' and what we must do and become to achieve a life together for the common good.⁵ In this essay I would like to reflect on four landmark statements of global ethics: the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is the best known, and as "additional resources" for shared vision the 1993 declaration *Towards a*

Global Ethic of the Parliament of the World's Religions, the Earth Charter, a civil society treaty finalized in 2000 and the "Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth" first proposed in 2010. In their different ways they show a powerful convergence of the shared values that can guide us in building a world community.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has a unique and eminent place in the development of global ethics and human aspirations for a more just and peaceful world.⁶ It is the fruition of a historical process of more than one hundred and fifty years beginning with the landmark declarations of the eighteenth century, the 1776 American Declaration of Independence and the 1789 French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Its constituent ethical concepts are universality, inherence, common humanity, human dignity, equality, freedom, and rights or entitlements including the individual rights, which taken together present a picture of human flourishing. It should be emphasized that its drafters, who were from diverse traditions, had made a thorough study of the world's philosophical and legal traditions. In her history of the drafting process, Mary Ann Glendon stresses that the UDHR drew on a very wide array of sources, resulting in a multi-cultural document. Charles Malik of Lebanon, one of the chief drafters, called it a "composite synthesis" when he addressed the General Assembly on the day the final document was adopted.⁷ In its Preamble the UDHR calls for recognition of the "inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family," and Article 1 states, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Humanity is one, and everyone without exception is a member of "the human family."⁸

Human dignity is the foundation of human rights. What is "human dignity" or "the dignity of the human person"? Rights arise from dignity – that which has dignity is worthy of respect because of its intrinsic value. Human dignity is possessed equally by all human beings just by virtue of their being human; they need not do anything to earn dignity and rights; this is called "simple inherence" of human rights.⁹ Rights cannot be denied on the basis of such characteristics as "race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or special origin, property, birth or other status" (Article 2), the ethical principle of non-discrimination. Equality of dignity is a modern idea and a radical departure from most of history, in which teachings affirming our common humanity have been drastically qualified in social practice by divisions of gender, ethnicity, religion, race, class or other social group,

and enslaved status. Human rights at its best is an uncompromisingly egalitarian ideal, an ideal that is still struggling to be manifested.

The rights spelled out in the Universal Declaration give an account of what is necessary for human flourishing. There are some thirty rights, not a large number. Also, human rights are regarded as indivisible and interdependent; the exercise and enjoyment of one right cannot be separated from the others. It is very important that rights and duties are correlative; rights imply duties and duties or responsibilities imply rights. In sum, the UDHR offer an integrated and powerful vision of the human condition and what constitutes the common good. Though anthropocentric or human-centered it remains essential for a global ethic.

It is a rare and significant step for a new basic human right to be formally recognized by the UN and added to the brief list. To be proposed it must be considered “fundamental” and derive from human dignity.¹⁰ The recognition of “The Right to a Healthy Environment” by the UN General Assembly in July 2022 is historic because *it expands the integral vision of human flourishing that is articulated in human rights*. It makes clear that the good of human beings is not apart from the natural world – *the well-being of humans and the well-being of Nature are inseparable*. In what follows we will consider more deeply this inseparability and the larger ethical vision of the dignity and worth of all entities in the natural world and the growing movement to affirm the Rights of Nature, which will be discussed below.

The Global Ethic of the Parliament of the World's Religions

Towards a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration was one of the most significant outcomes of the 1993 centenary Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, where it was signed by over 250 religious and spiritual leaders of many traditions from all over the world, and formally presented in a closing open-air plenary attended by 20,000 people.¹¹ It states the values and principles shared by the world's religions, as established by research and consultation with more than 200 religious leaders and scholars.

In the late 1980s the interfaith community in Chicago formed the Parliament of the World's Religions as an organization to host the centenary Convening of the historic first World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and to carry forward its original vision of ending bigotry and hatred and fostering oneness among religions. At the same time in Germany Catholic theologian Hans Küng was working on the project of “a new world ethic”

as the basis for a united engagement with critical global problems. Neither thought in terms of a new single religion or ideology, but rather the need to show that a consensus already exists on ethics and to promote these shared values as a foundation for harmony and cooperation. The organizers of the 1993 Parliament met with Küng in 1989 and they agreed to work together to create the Declaration. Küng, his colleagues and members of the Parliament, especially Daniel Gómez-Ibañez and the Most Rev. Dr. Thomas Baima, collaborated on the drafting, and the document was finalized by the Board of Trustees of the Parliament.¹²

It was decided that the Global Ethic Declaration should *raise the level of moral standards and expectations* – an important point – should be short, clear and strong rather than giving detailed prescriptions, and should be meaningful not only to adherents of diverse religions, but also to those of ethical conviction but without religious affiliation. The document does not refer directly to any Scripture, does not mention specific religious dogmas or beliefs, and is not overtly political. It begins with this foundational affirmation: "We affirm that there is a common set of core values found in the teachings of the religions, and that these form the basis of a global ethic. We affirm that this truth is already known, but yet to be lived in heart and action." The Global Ethic is also based on the finding that all traditions share the premise of the interdependence of all human persons and of all life with the consequent moral norm of reciprocity or "give and take," often called the Golden Rule.

Following its opening statement of the need for consensus on a global ethic, the Declaration refers to the achievement of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and makes: "a fundamental demand: every human being must be treated humanely." It then sets forth in detail five "Irrevocable Directives." These are:

1. *Commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life*
2. *Commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order*
3. *Commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness*
4. *Commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women*
5. *Commitment to a culture of sustainability and care for the Earth*

In 1993 the Global Ethic included the first four Directives; while the environment and caring for the Earth was mentioned many times, it was not a separate norm. As part of the observances of its 25th anniversary, the Parliament decided to expand the Global Ethic with a Fifth Directive. After a thorough consultation process, at the Convening of the Parliament in

Toronto in November 2018, the Fifth Directive was formally presented and approved by acclamation.¹³ Its closing words are:

Our relationship with each other and with the larger living world should be based on respect, care and gratitude. All traditions teach that the Earth is a source of wonder and wisdom. Its vitality, diversity, and beauty are held in trust for everyone including those who will come after us. The global environmental crisis is urgent and is deepening. The planet and its countless forms of life are in danger. Time is running out. We must act with love and compassion, and for justice and fairness – for the flourishing of the whole Earth community.

The Global Ethic overall strongly affirms our responsibility to Nature and to all life on Earth, and also states our responsibility to future generations.

*The Earth Charter*¹⁴

In 1983 the General Assembly adopted a resolution creating a World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). When the Commission, chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland of Norway, released its final report, *Our Common Future*, in spring of 1987, it called for a universal declaration on environmental principles and sustainable development to serve as the basis for a legally binding convention, a statement to be of comparable importance to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The adoption of an Earth Charter, as it came to be called, was one of the goals of the UN Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 but negotiations between governments failed to reach an agreement on a draft. The Earth Charter was removed from the Summit agenda so that no version of it was introduced, discussed or voted upon.

In 1993 Canadian environmentalist Maurice Strong, who had been the Secretary-General of the Earth Summit as well as of the first UN conference on the environment in Stockholm in 1972 and President Mikhail Gorbachev of the Soviet Union, together resolved to bring into being the Earth Charter that the Earth Summit had not. The process they launched in 1995 was intended to be inclusive and civil society-based, resulting in "a people's Earth Charter" which could stand on its own even though it would also seek government approval. The creation of the Earth Charter was the most broad-based consultation process ever to be conducted for a document of its kind, with input from over five thousand people and hundreds of organizations and groups. The concluding review was conducted by the Earth Charter Commission at UNESCO headquarters in Paris in March of 2000 and the final version of the Earth Charter was published on March 24.

The Earth Charter is a layered document with a Preamble in five parts followed by sixteen main principles with sub-sections, and a conclusion, 'The Way Forward'. The Preamble declares:

We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.¹⁵

The four ethical pillars of the Earth Charter are (1) Respect and Care for the Community of Life, (2) Ecological Integrity, (3) Social and Economic Justice, and (4) Democracy, Nonviolence and Peace.

The Earth Charter affirms both human dignity and the intrinsic value of all life forms. The ethics of the Earth Charter is not anthropocentric or human-centered but rather strongly biocentric or life-centered in its consistent references to 'the community of life' and to 'the Earth community', 'kinship with all life', "the larger living world" and 'other life'. It goes beyond the language of the 'value' of life as such to call for the attitudes and practices that arise from valuing of non-human life: respect and care (Principles 1 and 2). As with the Global Ethic, while not using the language of "rights" of Nature, it states explicitly that humans are "responsible for the greater community of life" and must respect Nature. Because entities in Nature have inherent dignity and worth, their rights are affirmed by implication through the indivisibility and correlation of rights and responsibilities. Again in alignment with the Global Ethic of the Parliament of the World's Religions, the Earth Charter as statement of global ethics clearly proposes to expand the understanding of moral community beyond the global in the sense of 'the human family' to the global in the sense of 'the Earth community' of all life and future generations.

The Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth

The Rights of Nature is an ethics and a legal concept that affirms the rights of entities in the natural world such as rivers, trees, individuals or groups of different species, whole ecosystems, Mother Earth or Nature itself. An international movement to secure and implement these rights through systems of law has been growing since the 1970s. These

rights include the right of natural entities to exist, to flourish and regenerate by their own natural processes, to be protected and also the right to remedy, including restoration when damaged. The concept of the rights of Nature draws extensively on Indigenous worldviews as well as on environmental ethics in other traditions.

A prominent milestone in the Rights of Nature was the adoption by Ecuador of a new Constitution which included a section on the rights of Nature or Pachamama, beginning, "Nature, or Pachamama, where life is reproduced and occurs, has the right to integral respect and for its existence and the maintenance and generation of its life cycles, structure, functions, and evolutionary processes. All persons, communities, peoples and nations can call upon public authorities to enforce the rights of nature."¹⁶ Inspired by the example of Ecuador, 2009 Constitution of Bolivia includes the right to a healthy environment and in 2010 the country's legislature adopted the Law of Mother Earth. In a 2009 speech to the UN General Assembly when it adopted his country's resolution to proclaim April 22 as "International Mother Earth Day," President Evo Morales Ayma of Bolivia called upon Member States to begin developing a "Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth." On Mother Earth Day in 2010 the People's World Conference in Cochabamba, Bolivia, attended by 35,000 people, adopted a People's Agreement which included as an attachment the "Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth" drafted by one of the gathering's 17 working groups.

The Cochabamba draft affirms that "we are all part of Mother Earth, an indivisible, living community of interrelated and interdependent beings" and since Mother Earth is the source of life, "to guarantee human rights it is necessary to recognize and defend the rights of Mother Earth and all beings in her." The rights of Mother Earth, including the right to life, respect, and the different conditions and elements that ensure life and flourishing are spelled out, as are "the obligations of human beings to Mother Earth" which belong to "Human beings, all States, and all public and private institutions." In addition, "The inherent rights of Mother Earth are inalienable in that they arise from the same source as existence," the grounding ethical principle of dignity and intrinsic worth of all beings as the source of their rights. A broad-based movement is now advocating that the General Assembly of the United Nations adopt a declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth.¹⁷

Conclusion

In this brief account I have tried to show how in these four landmark statements of global ethics, there is a compelling consensus on a core of shared values, based on moral

conviction and the evidence of cross-cultural research. There also has been an evolution of wider and wider vision with increasing affirmation that while all human beings are indeed equal in dignity and rights, the dignity and rights of humans are inseparable from the dignity of the natural world, which we must respect and care for. Our responsibility to Nature and all beings in Nature – also our "family" – is indivisible from the rights of these beings, of Mother Earth and of Nature itself. This is an paradigm shift on which a future of peace, justice and sustainability depends. It is a sign of hope that consensus on this greater vision and inclusion of all life is now emerging.

A central principle in this encompassing ethical vision, as we have also seen, is our responsibility to future generations. An important development has been the June 2023 launch of the Maastrich Principles on the Human Rights of Future Generations, and a Declaration on Future Generations is expected be appended to the Pact for the Future as one of the outcomes of the Summit for the Future. Its second draft states as a guiding principle that "A clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, where humanity lives in harmony with nature, must be created and maintained by urgently addressing the adverse impacts and consequences of climate change, pollution and biodiversity." (Para. 16).¹⁸

The Secretary-General of the United Nations in Section 125 of his 2021 report, "Our Common Agenda," has proposed that the United Nations Trusteeship Council be repurposed, inviting "States to consider making the Council available as a multi-stakeholder body to tackle emerging challenges and, especially, to serve as a deliberative forum to act on behalf of succeeding generations. Among other tasks, it could issue advice and guidance with respect to long-term governance of the global commons."¹⁹ This is a visionary proposal now supported by a number of civil society organizations.

The proposed new role of the Trusteeship Council has immense potential to safeguard human rights, especially the Right to a Healthy Environment and also in its inclusion of care for "the global commons" to protect the Rights of Nature. The ecosystems that support life on Earth —our atmosphere, oceans, seabed, wildlands, and polar regions — are the responsibility of all of us. Ensuring that Earth, its ecosystems and all forms of life survive and flourish for future generations is essential to establishing Peace in the fullest sense of harmony, wholeness, and right relationship.

Notes

¹ In this essay in certain sections I draw directly on my previously published work on global ethics, both for conceptual content and at times also for exact wording. Specific use is indicated by notes in the relevant passages.

² See David Little and Sumner B. Twiss, *Comparative Religious Ethics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), and Donald Brown, *Human Universals* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991).

³ See Paul Gordon Lauren, *The Evolution of International Human Rights: Visions Seen* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), Ch. 1.

⁴ Nigel Dower, *An Introduction to Global Citizenship* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), Ch. 2.

⁵ The foregoing two paragraphs derive from my co-authored chapter "The Earth Charter," in Frederick Bird, Bruce Grelle, Clark Miller, Kusumita P. Pedersen and Sumner B. Twiss, *The Practices of Global Ethics: Historical Developments, Current Issues and Contemporary Prospects* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 59-78.

⁶ The following two paragraphs draw conceptual content and wording on the author's two essays. "Human Dignity and Religious Freedom: A Constructive Ethical Reflection." *Interreligious Insight* 19/2 (December 2021): 32-47, and "Universality of Moral Norms: A Human Rights Perspective." In Arvind Sharma, ed., *The World's Religions after September 11*, Volume Two: Religion and Human Rights (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2009), 70-77.

⁷ See *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2001), 164.

⁸ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is widely available and may be found at the website of the United Nations at <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

⁹ Johannes Morsink, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Origins, Drafting and Intent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 295-97.

¹⁰ Prior to "The Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment," the most recent recognition of a new basic human right by a UN body was the Right to Water and Sanitation, by the General Assembly in 2010. See: <https://www.unwater.org/water-facts/human-rights-water-and-sanitation>

¹¹ The text of the Global Ethic is available at <https://parliamentofreligions.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Global-Ethic-PDF-2020-Update.pdf>

¹² For a detailed history, see Daniel Gómez-Ibañez, "Moving Towards a Global Ethic," in *A Sourcebook for Earth's Community of Religions*, Revised Edition, Joel D. Beversluis, ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: CoNexus Press and New York: Global Education Associates, 1995), 124-137.

¹³ See Myriam Renaud, "The Global Ethic and the Fifth Directive," *Interreligious Insight* 17/1 (June 2019), 42-49.

¹⁴ The following section is a revised version of selected passages from my co-authored chapter, "The Earth Charter," in Bird et al, *The Practices of Global Ethics*, 2016, which provides a detailed history and an ethical analysis.

¹⁵ The text of the Earth Charter is available at: www.earthcharter.org

¹⁶ Chapter 7, Articles 71-74. The Constitution of Ecuador is available in English as well as Spanish at the Political Database of the Americas, Georgetown University. See: <https://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Ecuador/ecuador.html>

¹⁷ Cormac Cullinan, who was co-president of the working group in Cochabamba that drafted the Declaration, gives a detailed account and provides the text of the draft in his *Wild Law: A Manifesto for Earth Justice*, Second Edition. Cambridge, UK: Greenbooks, 2011, 185-95.

¹⁸ Available at <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sotf-declaration-on-future-generations-rev2.pdf>

¹⁹ See: <https://www.un.org/en/common-agenda>

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