



Globethics.net Principles on Sharing Values *across Cultures and Religions*

1. Introduction

“Care and Compassion. Sharing Values across Cultures and Religions” was the theme of the Third International Conference of Globethics.net which took place from 25-29 January 2009 in Nairobi. About sixty ethicists, religious scholars and economists from 18 countries of five continents gathered for one week. Participants invested significant time and energy on determining a *methodology* for sharing values across cultures and religions. While most agreed that religion can substantially contribute to global ethics, some felt that religion is itself a problem. However, since many conflicts are in some way related to religious differences, the organisers felt that special attention needed to be given to religions.

Held in Kenya, the conference acknowledged the need to view the issues from the African perspective. The report presented by the group working on the African perspective stated that one cannot talk about African values without talking about religion. The group also feared that there is a tendency to view the questions of global ethics through the eyes of Western intellectual traditions and that this should not be the norm.

There are different types of interreligious and intercultural dialogues in ethics. Among them are grass-roots dialogues, institutional dialogues and academic dialogues – which all have specific objectives and methodologies.

A large part of the work in preparation of and during the conference was done in five work groups: ‘Defining Global Ethics’, ‘Ensuring a Successful Interreligious Dialogue on Ethics’, ‘Integrating Means and Methods of Sharing Values, in a Human-to-Human Approach’, ‘Balancing Power Relations, Inducing a Real Transformation’ and ‘Sharing Values in the Kenyan and East African Contexts’. All but the first one used Care and Compassion as a support theme and core values. Participants expressed the hope that the guidelines drawn from the discussions would be helpful to both religious and non-religious persons who engage in dialogue on values.

This report contains areas of general consensus of the conference participants, even if in some areas that consensus was somewhat unstable.

2. Global and Contextual Ethics

Global ethics is an inclusive approach towards common binding values, guiding principles, personal attitudes and common action across cultures, religions, political and economic systems and ideologies. Global ethics is grounded in the ethical recognition of inalienable human dignity, freedom of decision, personal and social responsibility and justice. Global ethics acknowledges the interdependence of all

human and non-human beings and extends the basic moral attitudes of care and compassion to our world. Global ethics identifies transboundary problems and contributes to their solution.

Global ethics promotes public awareness for those fundamental values and principles. They are the foundation on which the universal consensus on human rights is built. Human rights are the most tangible and legally binding expression of this ethical vision. Global ethics fosters trust among human beings and strengthens caring and action for global environmental protection.

Contextual ethics takes seriously the identity of persons and institutions in their local, cultural, religious, economic and political contexts. Global ethics needs to be local and contextual in order to have an impact on individual action and societal structures. On the other hand, contextual ethics becomes isolationist, if it remains local and is not linked to global ethics.

Contextual ethics appreciates and respects diversity in its different forms as social, political, cultural, religious, and bio-diversity. There is an enormous richness in diversity. It may decrease vulnerability and be a source of sustainability.

Contextual ethics contributes to global ethics. Together they can lead to unity in diversity. All cultures and religions can contribute to global values. For example, the contribution of African values to global values includes, that all of reality is a continuum, from the spiritual to the human to fauna, flora, and the inanimate world. Therefore, injuring nature is unethical. This implies responsibilities towards non-human living beings and the inanimate universe as well as the continuum between generations that have gone before and that come after us.

Global and contextual ethics are two poles which challenge each other and inseparably belong together.

Global and contextual ethics have to consider power structures. Global ethics can be abused for domination over other cultures, religions and values. Contextual ethics can be abused to defend traditional privileges or power. On global as well as on local level, 'power over others' tends to be oppressive, 'power with and for others' tends to be empowering and nurturing. Power as 'power from' (e.g. power from God, from the people through election) can be abused to justify oppressive power. It can also be used responsibly as an empowering power, serving the needs of the needy and thus responding to the origin of power.

3. Values and Norms

Global and contextual ethics are based on values and norms. *Values* are fundamental, long term benchmarks of orientation, rooted in and justified by specific worldviews. *Norms* are mid-term applications of values to specific contexts.

Some values like the golden rule and virtues like honesty are commonly accepted across cultures and religions. Values in general have religious and non religious justifications and origins.

Agreeing on values that are common for humankind and values and norms that may be different in specific contexts requires dialogue across cultures and religions. When common values can be affirmed through dialogue, they provide a foundation from which communities can engage in common action towards conflict resolution, reconciliation and peace.

This work is particularly urgent at times of conflict and violence, but more difficult to accomplish once a conflict has already started. Therefore, it is best if dialogues are set up and functioning before a conflict occurs; firstly for the purpose of sharing values that provide a foundation, and secondly for engaging in common action.

Below are examples of values that are shared across religions and cultures:

Care and compassion is the ability for empathy, respect and support of the other. It leads to solidarity. All religions emphasize the centrality of care and compassion.

Sharing leads to, enables, and sustains relationships between human beings and strengthens communities. Sharing power leads to a responsible, community-oriented use of power.

Participation, for example in decision making, is an expression of respecting human dignity and strengthening communities in an inclusive way. Sharing values in dialogue is a participatory process.

Justice/equity is based on the inalienable human dignity of every human being and their equality. Justice grows when people cultivate a deep respect towards each other. This is expressed in the Golden Rule of mutuality and reciprocity as the basic norm of equity: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

It grounds solidarity and fairness. All known religious traditions commend some version of the Golden Rule to their followers, the operation of which is based on reciprocity, empathy, enlightened self-interest, and some notion of moral autonomy, and which is used to facilitate cooperation not only within the in-group but also between members of that group, strangers and all human beings.

Peace is the condition of justice and, at the same time, its fruit. Aiming at peace which leads also to security is a motivation for and goal of sharing values.

Reconciliation is the healing power which enables the overcoming of past and present offenses, violations and conflicts and to rebuild relations and communities.

Responsibility is accountability for one’s own actions. The level of responsibility has to correspond to the level of power, capacity and capability. Those with more resources bear greater responsibility for resolving problems.

The participants affirmed that there are significant differences in the interpretation of values and value systems. Sometimes these differences are expressions of distortions and instrumentalisation, but at other times they are expressions of real differences. Accordingly, differences have to be treated in different ways.

4. Principles for Sharing Values in Transformative Dialogues

4.1 Different goals and forms of sharing values in dialogues

Sharing values can be done in various forms, such as in formal interreligious and intercultural dialogues, research partnership projects and common action. Sharing of values also happens informally in daily life as people relate with each other in neighbourhoods schools, work places, and sporting and cultural events. In such venues, neighbours, friends and colleagues may explore the deeper meanings in the fortunes and misfortunes of their day to day life, or engage with each other in common action. Sometimes, the opening of houses of worship to other religious communities for exposure visits or for their use (as appropriate) also facilitates the sharing of values.

One specific form of such sharing is through *formal dialogue*. There are many forms of interaction called dialogue – and not all are seen as true dialogue - for example: In a learning dialogue, participants want to learn from each other. A testimonial dialogue aims at presenting the own position and persuade the other to accept it. The negotiating dialogue aims at reaching an agreement. The public relations dialogue is just for window dressing. The action oriented dialogue looks at sharing by common action. Such sharing can be most fruitful when the dialogue is intended to be transformative. Transformative dialogue is a dialogue which nudges, or even prods and pushes participants beyond where they are to a new, richer and more inclusive understanding of who they are and what they should do. In order to have a fruitful transformative dialogue on sharing global and contextual values, the following principles are recommended:

4.2 Principles of personal *attitudes* in transformative dialogues

Honesty: People come to the dialogue table with varied motivations. Some also bring their fears and prejudices. The transformative nature of the dialogue will depend to significant extent on the ability of

participants to be honest with each other. Religious disciplines and personal reflections are often helpful means for each participant to prepare themselves for honest engagement.

Deep listening: Listening is a discipline that most people need to cultivate. The desire to have one's voice heard in coherent and clever expressions makes many to start thinking about what to say next while the other is still speaking, rather than carefully listen. Deep listening also requires one to listen not just to the words that are spoken but to emotions that are communicated non-verbally and to implicit values that are not expressed. Deep listening also requires one to be aware of the emotional triggers in one's own mind and have strong handles to keep from being swayed by them.

Walking in the other's shoes: The Golden Rule of reciprocity means to put oneself in someone else's place, to listen at some depth to the motivations and values of the other by walking in the other's shoes for a while.

Suspending judgment: Evaluating what the others communicate against our own values, we make judgments all the time. Transformative dialogue requires the conviction that unless one has walked in the other's shoes, or at least have listened at some depth, one cannot judge. Proper judgments are necessary for transformative dialogue. However, until the dialogue matures to the stage where participants are able to understand those values, it is necessary to suspend judgment.

Appreciating others' beliefs and values: It is necessary to come to a dialogue with a curiosity to appreciate and learn the beliefs and values of the dialogue partners and not with a motivation to debunk the beliefs and values of others. An important hallmark of transformative dialogue is that one participates hoping to learn and be enriched by the beliefs and values of the other.

Being self-critical of one's own beliefs: One does not come to dialogue with the expectation to prove that one's beliefs, values or tradition are right and true. Instead one comes to dialogue ready to be critical of one's own beliefs, values and tradition. It is easy to be self-critical among one's co-religionists. The real strength of the dialogue and its transformative nature is largely based on the ability and willingness of participants to be self-critical of their own beliefs, values and tradition in the presence of those from other traditions.

Acting in openness and transparency: Dialogue is transformative when trust is established between participants and the values of openness and transparency are shared. The personal attitudes mentioned above and the principles of organizing are helpful in achieving this.

4.3 Principles of *organizing* a transformative dialogue

Cultivating strong personal relationships is a necessary first step to break through stereotypes and prejudices that colour our casual relationships. Strong personal relationships help the conversations not only to be cordial, but also allow participants to take greater risks towards honest interactions.

Establishing an innovative methodology of preparation: Acknowledging that the person, organization or religious institution that initiates and organizes the dialogue often has the power to determine its outcome, an extra methodological step of creating an ad-hoc bi-lateral or multi-lateral organizing committee is recommended. The ad-hoc organizing committee will agree on goals, expectations and methodologies, raise funds, set the agenda, agree on the list of invitees, locate a common space and create a safe environment for dialogue to take place. The way a dialogue is organized is in itself an expression of ethical values such as equity and participation.

Creating a safe zone: Despite the best attempts to create a safe zone, participants may find that addressing controversial issues as religious beliefs and values, race relations or political and economic prerogatives too threatening. Facilitators trained in group processes and skilled in the discipline of dialogue can steer the dialogue process in ways that allows for participants to take risks in the group.

Interrogating self-understanding: It is important that participants engage in interrogations of their own self-understandings prior to engaging in dialogue. Participants in dialogues must be rooted in their traditions in order to be authentic. Such rootedness requires thorough reflections on one's own self understandings.

Exploring the self-understanding of the other: It is not unusual that participants will bring certain stereotypes and prejudices to the dialogue table. In order to get beyond this, it is important that participants explore the self-understanding of the other and seek to build trust.

Providing adequate time and space: Having multiple stakeholders also requires participatory interaction and decision-making. This means providing adequate time and space for participation by all parties although it is important to reach prior agreement about how much time each person gets. It also means instituting decision-making methods that do not create an environment that excludes those who lost in a vote. Methods that help participants reach a consensus is preferable for transformative dialogue.

Organize gender-diverse dialogues: Unless specifically determined that the dialogue be organized as a women's group or a men's group, it is important dialogues are intentionally gender-diverse. The problem particularly acute when formal dialogues of religious leaders are convened, since most religious leaders, even in today's world are men. This invariably means that the voices of women, who have significant experience and expertise in dialogue, are lost. Today, a formal dialogue event that is not gender diverse does not have credibility.

Engaging between religious and non-religious ethics: Sharing of values is not an end in itself but an opportunity to engage with each other in ethical behaviour and action. Insight from the discipline of ethics therefore is useful. However on this question a dialogue between secular ethicists and religious ethicists must be encouraged. Some secular ethicists are of the opinion that religion is a problem for ethics, rather than a help. Religious ethicists find their ethical reflection rooted in religion. The profoundness of today's ethical dilemmas requires that both groups engage with each other, especially when global challenges such as climate justice have to be solved engaging all different world views.

4.4 Principles of *assuring* that the dialogue is transformative

Looking at different identities: Such exploration will reveal the several identities that each participant brings to the table. Some identities are held forcefully or are solid while other identities are held lightly or are porous. In interreligious dialogue, for example, there is a tendency to look at participants only as religious persons. While that identity may be an obstacle to building trust, relating to the other person using another of his/her other identities, be it ethnic, national, political, economic or role in the family, can help create an opportunity for building trust.

Clarifying levels of power: In any group of people multiple levels of power are present. They are often experienced by the participants but are rarely acknowledged. Acknowledging and clarifying the various levels of power involved will help the dialogue process to move to its transformative level.

Keeping each other accountable: Accountability to the commitments which participants make to each other, is very important to the success of transformative dialogue. Since accountability often causes tension to arise in the group, participants don't often keep each other accountable. It is necessary that the participants understand tension as useful to the group process since it can help the dialogue reach its transformative goal.

Including contexts: No dialogue should be divorced from its context. Therefore a transformative dialogue must include reflections on the political, economic and other questions of that arise from the contexts in which the dialogue partners live. For example, the dialogue must take in to account, as a part of its content, histories, especially of oppression, while not being entrapped or circumscribed by them.

Interpreting from the others centre: While each participant must be rooted on his/her own interpretive centre, she or he must be careful not to interpret the other's values from the perspective of that centre, but rather from the perspective of the others' interpretive centre. This requires each participant to stand lightly to move back and forth between centres.

Starting cooperative action: Transformative dialogue does not only mean conversation but conversation that leads to cooperative action. Dia-praxis often provides another set of opportunities for sharing values for transformation.

Gaining new insights: A sign of a successful transformative dialogue is that new insights emerge from the centre of the group. These insights, different from the values or beliefs participants have already shared, appear as new insights that enriches each participant. Attentiveness to this emerging reality is necessary for transformative dialogue.

Open-ended and hopeful, such dialogues are contextually sensitive and have the greatest potential for undergirding and sustaining the development and education of a global ethics of responsibility. They also provide opportunities for problems to be addressed cooperatively, equitably and urgently.

4.5 Other means of sharing values than by formal dialogues

There are a variety of other means of sharing values than formal dialogues. Other dialogue involves a range of activities far beyond the verbal (spoken or written language). Music, the visual arts, touch, common meals etc. can also be understood as meaning-bearing 'languages'.

Art (music, visual arts, dance) can be used to understand values attached to a context as well as the values behind the intention of the artist. These values give expression to pieces of music, literature, film, theatre, dance, comedy/humour/irony, stories and folklore. In time, these expressions themselves become the carriers of these values. Institutions can engage artists-in-residence to create such expressions based on shared values, as well as to unveil the values that are embedded in older pieces. This creates new and improved opportunities to teach the community to share values.

Marriages across cultures and religions provide another opportunity to share values. An intercultural or interreligious couple will need to negotiate a new set of values as they set up their family and raise children. It is important that educational and religious institutions become more intentional about teaching those about to enter into such marriages the tools for sharing values

Engaging in neighbourhood dialogues: Many formal dialogues bring to the table religious, political or economic leaders. While such dialogues are useful, some of the best dialogues and many transforming experiences take place in local neighbourhoods where neighbours gather to talk about their common concerns in order to find meaning or agree on common actions. It is important to privilege the participation from below by engaging the participants at the grassroots such that their voices are lifted up so that they are heard both by the leaders and by the general public.

A draft of this text was adopted at the Globethics.net International Conference 25-29 January 2009 in Nairobi. It was drafted and revised by Dr. Shanta Premawardhana, Director, Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation at the World Council of Churches, and by Prof. Dr. Christoph Stueckelberger, Founder and Executive Director, Globethics.net.

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