

FAQ about the Global Ethic Project

1) Is the Global Ethic Project a religious project ?

No, it is an ethical project that can and should be supported by both religious and non-religious persons.

2) Does the Global Ethic Project aim at a unification of all religions ?

No, there is no common fundament of belief shared by the great world religions. The goal is not the unification or amalgamation of the religions, but rather dialogue, cooperation, and peace-making between the religions – on the basis of common ethical principles and values.

3) Doesn't peace-making between the religions mean ignoring the differences between them ?

On the contrary, it means taking the differences in teaching, rituals and practices seriously and precisely for that reason, despite these differences, emphasizing the need to recognize those ethical norms that they all hold in common.

4) Doesn't Global Ethic involve a new global ideology ?

No, Global Ethic is not some sort of artificially constructed, unified ideology; it is not at all something new. It is rooted in the age-old wisdom of human communities and in the elementary rules of living, which have emerged in the course of human development and which have come to expression in the diverse religious and ethical traditions of human civilizations.

5) Is the Global Ethic meant to replace the ethics of the individual religions ?

No, the Torah of the Jews, the Sermon of the Mount of the Christians, the Qur'an of the Muslims, the Bhagavadgita of the Hindus, the Discourses of Buddha, the wisdom of Confucius continue to serve as the foundations of faith and practice for the adherents of these religions.

6) Isn't Global Ethic a Western programme that is being imposed upon the rest of the world ?

By no means! The emphasis on being human and the Golden Rule of mutual respect goes back at least to Confucius, five hundred years before Christ. And the four ethical maxims – no murdering, no stealing, no lying, no misuse of sex – can be found already with Patanjali, the founder of Yoga, as well as in the Buddhist Canon, and, of course, in the Hebrew Bible, in the New Testament and in the Qur'an.

7) Aren't ethical norms always dependent upon a particular culture, so that in a different culture everything is different ?

Without question, there are considerable cultural differences in the realization of ethical norms. But there are certain fundamental ethical rules that hold (or should hold) in all the different cultures. Whether a gangster in Japan or in Southern Italy orders a murder, whether a head of government in Germany or in the USA lies to the parliament or to the public, whether a scientist in India or in China publishes falsified evidence for his theories, whether a businessman in New York or in Zurich issues manipulated balances – in all these cases the perpetrator must reckon with the loss of credibility and with legal sanctions and punishment.

8) Don't the ethical responsibilities of man stand in opposition to the rights of man ?

On the contrary, without the observation of the elementary human responsibilities and duties, there would be no realization of human rights. In all Asian cultures, the attempt to proclaim human rights without respect for human duties to others and to the community at large leaves them for the most part without effect. Moreover, it is easier to understand and to give reasons for human rights, when one starts with human responsibilities. Gandhi once said, "The Ganges of rights arises in the Himalaya of duties."

9) Isn't Global Ethic a utopia without a chance of success ?

One can hardly open a newspaper these days without finding – mostly in connection with some scandal or other – appeals to traditional ethical norms. Happily, the recognition of ethical norms is making notable progress in the sciences, in the media, in international organizations, and particularly in many schools. At stake is a world wide ethical movement, which – like the questions of detail such as insuring equal rights for men and women, preventing the threatening climate catastrophe, even the campaign against smoking – involves a long and complex process of changing attitudes and developing problem awareness. Global Ethic is a long-range project.

10) Would Muslims accept the Global Ethic idea ?

Already the Global Ethic Declaration of 1993 was signed by Muslim representatives. On the international scene, renowned Muslims like Prince Hassan of Jordan have spoken out in favour of shared ethical standards and against terrorism. In fact, it was the then President of Iran, Chatami, who, already in the plenary assembly of the United Nations in 1998, publicly called for a "dialogue of civilizations" sponsored by the United Nations as an alternative to the threatening "clash of civilizations".

11) Isn't it true that in the world religions women are pushed to the sidelines ? Must this not be stopped ?

By all means! The fact is, that all the religions by and large are more or less patriarchal. Whether or not there was once a matriarchy in religion is open to question. In any case, patriarchy has come to dominate.

In modern society, the demand for partnership between men and women more and more asserts itself. The religions cannot ignore this demand. In Reform Judaism, there are now woman rabbis, many Christian churches have women pastors, and, in Islam, women can now serve as prayer-leaders at least for other women. In all the religions, there are now well-organized feminist movements. The future of the religions will depend – not non-essentially – upon whether or not they succeed in involving women in responsibility on the basis of equality.

12) Did the Global Ethic idea gain new urgency through the tragic events of September 11, 2001 ?

Indeed, it was the tragedy in the USA that awakened many people to the urgency of the Global Ethic Project: No peace between nations without peace between the religions, no peace between the religions without dialogue between the religions. When such dialogue fails to take place or is broken off, the alternative is often violence: when conversations do not take place, shooting may follow. Not only in Islam, but also in Judaism and in Christianity, indeed even in the Asiatic religions, there exists a real danger of instrumentalizing religion for political purposes. Then an explosive mixture of religion and politics emerges. Fanaticized religion thus becomes a danger for world peace. Happily, however, there is an increasing interest in inter-religious dialogue and in a global ethic even in circles that previously had shown reluctance.

13) Can the Global Ethic idea be helpful in the economy ?

Ethic is always a helpful, humanitarian affair. Like the guardrail on a curving mountain road, it is designed not to narrow the road but to insure that the driver safely masters the ascent or descent. For businesses, ethical guidelines are like guardrails. They are an aid to individual employees, who can appeal to them when they refuse, for instance, to practice corruption or deceit. When we achieve a globalization of the economy, of technology, and of communications, but do not achieve a globalization of ethics, then we have no assurance that things will not go badly for humanity.

14) Is there a difference between ethic and ethics ?

In fact, the two words are often used interchangeably. But in the strict and precise sense, there is a difference. "Ethics" refers to a body of teaching about moral behaviour, i.e. an ethical system, like that of Aristotle or Immanuel Kant. Living together peacefully does not demand that everyone agrees in a particular ethical system.

"Ethic" refers to something different, not a body of teaching or a system, but rather an inner moral attitude that expresses itself as a way of behaving according to definite norms and rules. In other words, it is a moral stance that determines one's way of acting.

15) Could one say that a Global Ethic proposes to create something like the Ten Commandments of the World Religions ?

No, this is not the intention. Instead of setting up a new set of commandments, it proposes to identify long existing moral coordinates for the compass of conscience. The Global Ethic Declaration is an attempt to identify the age-old ethic of humanity, which has developed over the long course of human history; it does this in six fundamental rules – two basic principles and four maxims. Men and women must clearly recognize that in matters of morals there is no room for post-modern "whateverism", no "anything goes": there are definite rules to which all are bound and these rules are shared by all.

16) Can the global ethic be something added to my religion ?

No, ethic is not a supplement to, but rather it is a dimension within every religion. Every religion consists in the first place of teachings, doctrines and dogmas of various types, secondly of rites, rituals, and ceremonies, and thirdly of ethical prescriptions, i.e. an ethic. It is this third dimension to which the global ethic is principally addressed. The global ethic does not intend to replace the teachings and rituals; instead it aims to call attention to the common ethical standards.

17) Is the Global Ethic nothing more than a minimal consensus in ethical matters ?

Much would be achieved, when in many moral questions such a minimal consensus were to prevail. However, the ethical demands expressed in a Global Ethic are not minimal, but rather fundamental, which is something else again. Living together as a family, for instance, presupposes a certain number of elementary rules, for instance, not lying to each other, not resorting to violence etc. Such rules should not be considered minimalistic, they are rather elementary and fundamental and have wide-reaching consequences.

18) What does the Dalai Lama think of the Global Ethic Project ?

The Dalai Lama is behind the project. He took part in the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1993 and was the first to put his signature under the Global Ethic Declaration, which that body issued.