

GLOBAL ETHIC OR GLOBAL HEGEMONY?

REFLECTIONS ON RELIGION, HUMAN DIGNITY
AND CIVILISATIONAL INTERACTION

CHANDRA MUZAFFAR

ASEAN ACADEMIC PRESS



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*FOR my schoolteachers in Kedah,
whose guidance, concern and commitment
instilled in me a thirst for knowledge
and a love of learning*





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Preface

THOUGH THE TITLE of this book is in the form of a question, the answer is obvious. Global hegemony is the reality. A global ethic has yet to emerge.

The first few chapters of this book attempt to understand the concept of a 'global ethic'. The term itself is used in a very specific sense. It is a direct reference to the Parliament of the World's Religions' quest for a 'Global Ethic'.

By a 'Global Ethic', the Parliament means universal values, principles and standards that are acceptable to the peoples of the world. Enunciated in 1993, at the second international congress of the Parliament of the World's Religions held in Chicago (the first was also held in the same city in 1893), the concept has made very little impact upon popular consciousness. Nonetheless, it is an important idea especially in a situation where planetary information and communication technologies; global capital and global markets; and international political crises and international humanitarian disasters have rendered national borders less and less relevant.

I have been deeply committed to the idea of shared universal spiritual and moral values and principles that can bind the human family together for a very long while. It was in 1975 that I first articulated the concept at a national seminar organised by a Teachers' Union. On that occasion I had ar-

gued that the Malaysian school system should inculcate in students an appreciation of the common values that the different religious and cultural philosophies uphold as a way of promoting national integration.* Over the last three decades I have continued to elaborate and expand upon the concept of shared values in the context of inter-faith and inter-civilisational dialogues.

At the same time, however, I have become increasingly aware of the enormous difficulties facing this endeavour to persuade diverse religious communities to accept a shared universal ethic that is in harmony with, and yet transcends, their own specific religious teachings. One of the formidable obstacles is the dominance and control of an élite over the rest of humankind camouflaged in the name of progress, enlightenment and civilisation. This global hegemony rooted in Washington's overwhelming power is a challenge to equitable and egalitarian inter-civilisational interaction. It repudiates the emergence of a global ethic. For if what prevails in the relationship between civilisations, religions and cultures is the dominance of one over the rest, resulting in iniquities perpetrated against the latter, how can we expect anyone to believe that shared values such as global justice and fairness can ever be put into practice? A number of chapters in the book focus upon this question.

Some of the other chapters analyse the impact of global hegemony upon religion, human dignity, the media and so on. In each instance, I try to show that unless we overcome

* See Chandra Muzaffar, *Challenges and Choices in Malaysian Politics and Society* (Penang: Aliran, 1989), pp. 441-452.

the problem of global hegemony, all our efforts to establish peace and harmony among the different communities and nations will come to naught. This is why the book also examines the struggle against global hegemony. There is a chapter that looks at the politics of resistance against global hegemony in East Asia just as another chapter reflects on the role of global civil society in the quest for a just and peaceful world.

The two chapters that comprise the Epilogue have been added on not only because they are of current and contemporary interest, but also because each of them is linked in different ways to the two halves of the title of this book. 'The Bush Victory: Its Implications for Global Politics', for instance, probes the likely challenges posed by Washington's hegemonic politics in the next four years while 'The Tsunami Tragedy: Divine Fury or Human Folly?' alludes to the global empathy for the victims of the tragedy as a manifestation of international solidarity in the face of common human suffering.

Finally, readers will realise that while most of the essays were written at different times and on different occasions in the last two years, there is a single unifying theme that runs through the book which is reflected in its title.

Chandra Muzaffar
Damansara Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia
February 2005

Acknowledgements

NO AUTHOR CAN claim that the shape of ideas in his book is entirely his own work. Over the years, my thinking on the global system and the direction in which it is moving have been influenced by my intellectual and spiritual interaction with a number of friends. In particular, I owe an immense debt to Professor Richard Falk, Professor Emeritus of International Law and Practice at Princeton University, now residing in Santa Barbara, California; Professor Fred Dallmayr, Professor of Political Theory at the University of Notre Dame, in Notre Dame, Indiana; Professor Kinhide Mushakoji of the International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR) based in Tokyo, Japan; and Professor Joseph Camilleri of La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia.

In the preparation of this book, my trusted friend and colleague, Rohana Yusuf, the Secretary-General of the International Movement for a Just World (JUST), was a great help. So was my capable Secretary, Ng Yen Ling. My dear daughter Anisa also gave invaluable assistance.

The rest of my family: my wife, Mariam Hashim; my elder daughter, Samirah, and her husband, Nizam; my little grandson, Haziq, the 'master' of our household; and my mother-in-law, Zainab Kadir, provided the sort of support and succour that I have always cherished.

However much the moral and material help and support I have received in the preparation of this book, I am solely responsible for its shortcomings.

Chandra Muzaffar

Dr. Chandra Muzaffar was born in the state of Kedah in the Northwestern part of Malaysia in 1947. He studied at the Bedong English School, the Ibrahim School in Sungei Patani and the Sultan Abdul Hamid College in Alor Star in his home state before enrolling at the University of Singapore for a degree in Political Science. He also obtained his PhD from the same University in 1977.

For many years, Chandra taught at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in Penang before joining the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur as Professor and Director at the Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, his last academic position. Apart from writings on civilisational dialogue, he has published extensively on religion, human rights, Malaysian politics and international relations. Chandra has written or edited 19 books and written many articles in English and Malay. Some of his works have been translated into other languages as well.

Since he began his academic career in 1970, Chandra has been active in NGO work. From 1977 to 1991 he founded and led a multiethnic social reform group called Aliran Kesedaran Negara (ALIRAN). Since 1992 he has been associated with the International Movement for a Just World (JUST) of which he is the President. JUST is concerned about challenges to social justice and human dignity in global politics. It also attempts to develop guiding ideas on a just and compassionate civilisation based upon shared universal spiritual and moral values.

Chandra also sits on the Board of other international NGOs. He travels overseas frequently giving lectures and participating in conferences on themes related to global justice and civilisational interaction.

The Golden Rule of Life

On September 4, 1993, the Parliament of the World's Religions' meeting in Chicago, Illinois, adopted the 'Declaration on a Global Ethic'. Central to the Global Ethic is the Golden Rule of Life.

The Golden Rule of Life was the theme of my presentation at a Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue on 'The Global Ethic and Good Governance', organised by the Global Family for Love and Peace and the United Nations Economic Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) held in Paris, France, in May 2003.

The text of my speech at that Dialogue is published below.

DO NOT DO to others what you do not want others do to you. Or to put it in more positive language: *Do to others what you want others do to you.* This is the Golden Rule of Life.

The Golden Rule of Life is found in all religions.

In Islam, it is expressed in the following manner: "Not one of you is a believer until you desire for your neighbour that which you desire for yourself."

Buddhism asks us to "Treat all creatures as you would like to be treated."

Hinduism reiterates, “This is the essence of morality: ‘Do not do to others which if done to you would cause you pain’.”

In Christianity it is said that, “Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.”

Sikhism advises us, “Do as you desire goodness for yourself as you cannot expect tasty fruits if you sow thorny trees.”

Judaism puts it plainly, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour—that is the basic law, all the rest is commentary.”

And in the Bahá’í Faith it is stated, “If your eyes be turned towards justice, choose for your neighbour that which you would choose for yourself.”

It is because the Golden Rule is such a vital principle of living that the distinguished Swiss-German philosopher, Professor Hans Küng, gave it the emphasis it deserves in his exposition of the ‘Global Ethic’. Unfortunately, the international community has yet to recognise and appreciate the significance of this principle.

How does the Golden Rule operate in the different spheres of life? Its role in interpersonal relations is so obvious that it requires little elucidation. If you are hypocritical towards your friend, do not expect him to be sincere towards you. The same would apply to gender relations. To expect love from one’s partner, one should express affection towards her. In multiethnic societies, the Golden Rule would demand that there is a reciprocal relationship of trust between communities.

Just as the Golden Rule is valid for relations at the societal level, so is it critical in the relations between governor and governed. In all our religious traditions, rulers are expected to be just to their subjects. The subjects, in turn, are expected to show allegiance to their rulers. Conversely, if a ruler is cruel to his people, he should not be surprised if they, in turn, show contempt for him. This is what happened to the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein, when he was ousted in the recent Iraq war. Television images of his people smashing one of his countless statues in Baghdad was 'just retribution' for his tyrannical actions against them.

The Golden Rule in International Politics

This reciprocal factor also works in international politics and global governance. If we want other nations and peoples to respect our sovereignty, our integrity and our rights, we should also respect their sovereignty, their integrity and their rights. To understand this let us reflect on September 11 (911). A lot of ordinary Americans were shocked and bewildered by September 11. Why should anyone want to kill us? Why do people hate America? What wrong have we done to others to deserve this, they asked in utter incredulity. Most American citizens do not know that millions and millions of innocent men, women and children from Latin America to the Middle East to Southeast Asia have been killed either directly or indirectly by American military power since World War II in order to sustain and perpetuate Pax Americana. The overbearing dominance of American imperialism has caused so much pain, anger and outrage among its victims that there are fringe elements in many parts of the world to-

day who are prepared to become suicide bombers so that they can teach the powers-that-be in Washington, D.C. a lesson. September 11 was, from that perspective, an act of revenge, a retaliation of sorts for all the wrongs that the US (or rather Washington) had done to the rest of the world.

This is why if the powers-that-be in Washington and the American people do not want September 11 to recur in the future, they should uphold the Golden Rule. They should not do to others what they do not want others to do to them. This is what I emphasised in my open letter to President George W. Bush four days after September 11.

Overcoming Structural Obstacles

However, to put the Golden Rule into practice in international relations, we must be prepared to overcome major structural and attitudinal obstacles. We cannot expect a nation to treat another as an equal, to respect its integrity and sovereignty, if there is a total lack of symmetry in power in global affairs. The US is much, much more powerful than other countries in the world today—especially in military terms. Its capacity for violence, its ability to kill and maim others, to inflict pain and suffering upon the rest of humankind is so immense, that all other nations and peoples have no choice but to tremble in fear before the only hyperpower of our time. The hyperpower's dominant might is reflected in other spheres as well, albeit on a lower scale. In politics and diplomacy, in economics and finance, in information and culture, in science and technology, in sports and entertainment, the US is the pre-eminent world power. It is because it is so pre-eminent, it feels it can do what it wants to

others while others have no right to seek redress. It is preponderant power that has made Washington so arrogant. It is unfettered power that has tempted Washington time and again to violate the Golden Rule of Life.

Gross disparities in the possession and execution of power have prompted others—and not just Washington—to transgress the Golden Rule. In recent history, a number of big countries have broken the Rule in their relations with their neighbours—from Russia to India to Indonesia. Within individual nation-states, when the élite command too much power and are not accountable to the people, they tend to abuse their authority. There are numerous examples of this all over the world. In gender relations, masculine power conditioned by physical, cultural and historical factors has been the bane of the so-called weaker sex which has suffered all sorts of injustices at the hands of patriarchal societies right through history.

More egalitarian power structures at all levels and in all spheres of society are essential if we want to bring the Golden Rule into fruition. Since I am focusing upon the Golden Rule as a global ethic, I would advocate the radical reform of global institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) as a way of checking the unfettered power of Washington. More specifically, global institutions should be transformed in such a manner that nations big and small would be able to relate to one another in a spirit of egalitarian fraternity. Of course, the bigger and stronger will always exercise more influence in international affairs than the smaller and weaker ones, but

there is no reason why the big and strong should not also submit to international laws, rules and norms. Only if this happens, will all nation-states be able to enjoy equal rights and fulfil equal responsibilities in the international arena. Only then will human dignity—the dignity of each and every human being on earth—which is a cherished ideal in the UN Charter, have some meaning.

Reforming global institutions of governance in a more egalitarian direction will be no easy task. Powerful states will oppose any such endeavour, as we have seen in the last 8 years when each and every proposal to make the UN more democratic and more equitable from the point of view of the majority of its members has been sidelined through the clever manipulation and manoeuvring of the US, Britain, France, Russia and others. Nonetheless, global civil society should continue to campaign with all the energy and resources at its disposal for a more just international system.

Attitudinal Impediments

Even if we succeed to introduce major structural changes at the global level, we will still have to work towards attitudinal transformations at the individual level which can help sustain the new, more equitable institutions. Indeed, the Golden Rule can only flourish in global governance if we as human beings become less power-centred, less wealth-centred, less prestige-centred and less status-centred. To put it differently, how will we grant the ‘other’ state, or community, or person, what we want for ourselves, if we continue to be selfish and greedy and avaricious? The Golden Rule

can only succeed if human beings as a whole become more caring, more sharing and more giving in their attitudes.

Those of us who are committed to the Golden Rule should try to instil these 'other' oriented attitudes of caring, sharing and giving through the family, the school, the media and through other channels that often help to shape social values. We may make some progress. But it is going to be tough. How do we change fundamental values and attitudes which are so deeply ingrained in people—selfishness which is an outgrowth of one of the most natural attributes of the human being, namely, self-interest—when the entire environment militates against us, when the environment itself promotes and propagates selfishness and greed?

The environment we are talking about is the global environment shaped by corporate, casino, consumerist (3C) capitalism. 3C capitalism which allows mega mergers of mega corporations; which encourages speculative capital to rule the roost; which glorifies conspicuous consumption as a deity; is predicated on crass acquisition and unending accumulation. And acquisition and accumulation in capitalist culture is driven by greed and selfishness. There is perhaps no evidence that is more compelling of the real character of 3C capitalism than the fact that the incomes of the three wealthiest men on earth exceed the gross domestic product of 48 of the least developed countries! More than half of humankind live on less than 2 US dollars a day. The amount of money spent on a cow in the European Union in a month is more than what a citizen of Sub-Saharan Africa earns in a year. The situation is worsening by the day. In 1960, the top

20 per cent of the world earned 30 times what the bottom 20 per cent earned; by 2002, it had become 90 times!

If humankind is able to live with these vast iniquities, it is because selfishness wears the mask of respectability and greed has acquired legitimacy today. It is—I repeat—3C capitalism that has made this possible. Indeed, it has made acquiring and accumulating wealth a glorious virtue—at least in the eyes of the movers and shakers of the global system.

A Glimmer of Hope

Can anything challenge this system? Perhaps the values and principles embodied in religion—religion that gave birth to the Golden Rule—offer a glimmer of hope. Right through history, it is spiritual awareness, an awakening of the soul that has sometimes transformed individuals and even whole communities. The great emperor, Asoka, became a different person, a humane and just ruler, after the battle of Kalinga, when he converted to Buddhism. The Arabs of Medina and Mecca were transformed into a people with strong ethical principles willing to sacrifice their self-interest for God and the larger good after they embraced Islam. It was this moral transformation under the leadership of the Prophet Muhammad that laid the foundation for the evolution of a splendid Islamic civilisation guided by values such as justice and equality between the 8th and 14th centuries.

There is certain significance in these momentous transformations of the past since there is a religious resurgence taking place in various parts of the world today. Even in Europe, which has moved away from institutionalised relig-

ion over the last two centuries, spiritual consciousness expressing itself through a newfound attachment to the Transcendent and the Sacred is beginning to surface again. Is the world moving towards a new spirituality?

Perhaps it is within this new spiritual ethos that the greatest moral principle of all—*Do to others what you want others to do to you*—will find a new birth.



A Global Ethic: An Evaluation

On September 4, 2003, in various parts of the world seminars and forums were organised to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the adoption of *A Global Ethic* by the Parliament of the World's Religions. In Malaysia, a public forum was jointly sponsored by an international Buddhist movement, the Soka Gakkai International, and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAF). I was invited to deliver the keynote address.

The address is published below.

'A GLOBAL ETHIC' is a concept closely associated with the Parliament of the World's Religions. It was adopted in the form of a Declaration on September 4, 1993, at Grant Park, Chicago, Illinois. The moving spirit behind this idea of 'A Global Ethic' was, of course, the distinguished Swiss-German philosopher, Professor Hans Küng.

What did the Parliament of the World's Religions and Professor Hans Küng mean by 'A Global Ethic'? In their words, "By a global ethic we do not mean a global ideology or a single unified religion beyond all existing religions, and certainly not the domination of one religion over all others. By a global ethic we mean a fundamental consensus on

GLOBAL ETHIC OR GLOBAL HEGEMONY?

is an important book. It addresses one of the most critical questions facing humanity today: Is global peace possible without overcoming the challenge of global hegemony? Global hegemony or global dominance and control by an élite is one of the major direct and indirect causes of contemporary wars and conflicts. Hegemony explains the war in Iraq and the continuing conflict between Israel and Palestine. It is also responsible for the widening gap between the global rich and the global poor which in turn has given rise to global tensions. Even the fears of global cultural and intellectual imperialism are related to global hegemony. As long as there is global hegemony, the author argues, a just world in which humanity is held together by shared universal values, principles and standards will remain a mere dream. In other words, global hegemony negates a global ethic.

CHANDRA MUZAFFAR is President of the International Movement for a Just World (JUST) in Malaysia

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