

THE DRAFTING OF A GLOBAL ETHIC: A MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE

by
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For a commentator it may be the wrong thing to do, but I should like to say right at the start that I fully support Leonard Swidler's project of drafting a global ethic and winning acceptance for it, global acceptance, if possible.

Islam, as we know, is not only a faith with a theology, philosophy and mysticism, but also a culture and a social phenomenon of global character--with a history of more than fourteen hundred years. If today one speaks of "the Islamic perspective," further information is needed in order to know what is meant. Hence, when I as a Muslim say that I have no difficulties with Leonard Swidler's presentation of a universal global ethic, then of course I must add that I represent only one of many possible perspectives within the Islamic spectrum. Indeed, there is the famous saying of our Prophet, according to which: One day his community will be splintered into 72 sects; only the 73rd will be saved. Now, fortunately I belong to that 73rd!--but of course my representativeness is thereby limited. On the other hand, as a historian of religion I believe I am in a position to say some things at least partially authoritative about Islam and a universal global ethic.

I believe that there are a number of reasons for Muslims to endorse a universal global ethic, first and foremost being the fact that Islam itself was originally intended as something like a global ethic. The Prophet Muhammad did not wish to found a new religion. He was driven by the desire to bring people back to the original faith of Abraham. He understood that the various types of Christianity and sects of Judaism all sprang from the same source. Since they had come to differ amongst themselves considerably, he saw his task in re-establishing the original Abrahamic religion, called Islam. This may sound odd to someone who associates the word *islam* with the religion of Islam as we know it today, or even with the world community of Islam as a social phenomenon. We might forget about Islam in this sense for a moment and bear in mind that the word *islam* has a meaning in Arabic. It signifies submission to the will of God, and peace. In that sense *islam* is the same as *salam*, which is the same as the Hebrew *shalom*, meaning peace, with the special connotation of soundness, wholesomeness.

Muhammad made it his mission to bring people back to *islam* in that original sense. He did not intend to convert people to his own religion; he wanted to convert them to the religion of Abraham. To this end the prototype of Abrahamic religion had to be reconstructed, and that became the religion of Islam as we know it today, at least in its ideal sense, as enshrined in the revelation of *Al-Qur'an* (Koran). Hence, I must once again emphasize that the Prophet Muhammad originally did not think of the creation of a new faith community. He was first of all concerned to unite the various groups of believers in God on a platform that was common to all. He proceeded on the assumption that the various sects of Jews and Christians as well as the other monotheists all formed a single family which through unfortunate accidents fell into dispute with one another. Consequently, he took as his task the reestablishment of that prototype of Abrahamic religion, monotheism.

It is in my opinion no accident that a new religion like that of Baha'i grew specifically out of Islam. It is similar with the Sikh religion, despite its "local color," for behind the Indian facade is hidden an original drive for unity, for a synthesis of Islam and Hinduism. As already earlier with Muhammad, so also with Guru Nanak in India and Baha'ullah in Persia, nothing came from this drive--nothing of this bringing together of the different faith communities. In each case a new religion arose, that is, precisely the opposite of what was at first aimed at. Nevertheless, this original motive, the unity of all believers, never was completely lost, at least not in the mystical tradition.

Sufism, with many regional differences, was for a long time dominant in the Islamic world. Today as well Sufism is still stronger than militant Fundamentalism. Wherever Sufism plays a role, the unity of all religions is on the agenda. In this sense Sufism and Fundamentalism are diametrically opposed to each other. The

Fundamentalists put up fences, dividing walls, they separate, preferably with an Iron Curtain. On the contrary, the Sufis seek to tear down everything that divides.

In interreligious dialogue, therefore, there is a problem of a particular sort with many Muslims, and especially those who are Sufi-oriented. Interreligious dialogue definitely does not wish to work syncretically. Indeed, it has a special need to differentiate itself from syncretic streams, to defend itself against the accusation of syncretism. The fear of syncretism is a restrictive limit for many who otherwise are fully in favor of dialogue. Hence, the *Dialogue Decalogue* of Leonard Swidler to a large extent excludes syncretism.

Many Muslims, on the other hand, especially those who are Sufi-oriented, ask themselves, what is really so terrible with syncretism? For many the ideal is *wahdat al-wujud* (the "unity of all being"). Others have difficulties with the pantheism that is implied therein, but would like to stress the essential unity of all religions. Hence, there is the revision that is dominant among our mystics: *wahdat ash-shuhud* (the "unity of witnesses").

Why do I relate all this? I am concerned to illustrate the fundamental readiness to accept the drafted universal ethic. The current exclusivist positions fought for by a strengthened Fundamentalism, the cultural Apartheid striven for by the Islamists (Muslim Fundamentalists), the anti-Western xenophobia of our fanatics are all factors which easily can give the impression that Muslims *qua* Muslims are less open to such universalist goals.

I do not hesitate to maintain that precisely the opposite is the case. Islamism, that is, Fundamentalism, has indeed increased in strength, but it still remains a minority phenomenon. The majority of Muslims are especially receptive to universalistic undertakings--with, naturally, differences conditioned by specific historical experiences and varying interpretations of Islam. As a rule, however, a draft like this universal global ethic will not only encounter open ears but will also stimulate religious echos.

"Come here for a word which is in common between you and us," it says in the Qur'an. There we have a literal translation of "dialogue," i.e., a "word between" (*dia-logos*) conversation partners. And there also we have the presentation of a common platform of all believers; for the special word between the believers of all religions, that word which is common to all of them is the confessing of God.

From this expectation Muslims can only welcome the hoped-for establishment of a universal global ethic. It doesn't need any theological tricks. For this one needs no new theology.

Islam was to do justice to both major purposes with which the term religion is usually associated, viz. an explanation of the world and an ethics. In Islam, as in Judaism, the emphasis is a little more on ethics. Given the fact that Islam, in its capacity as the reborn faith of Abraham, was meant to be a platform for Jews, Christians and other monotheists, it had to be universal. It was not a message to any particular people, not a religion for Arabs exclusively. Quite the contrary, the basic assumption underlying Muhammad's message, one that is clearly and frequently stated in *Al-Qur'an*, is that God sent messengers to all peoples. Every people has had its messenger. Jesus was understood as a messenger to the Jews primarily. Finally there was to be a messenger for all humanity, Muhammad.

Accordingly, the ethics of this prototype of Abrahamic religion *had* to be universal. The express purpose was to do away with particularisms. Not without reason have anthropologists accused Muslims of cultural leveling and creating a *homo islamicus*, enforcing a high degree of uniformity on otherwise very diverse parts of our world.

From the viewpoint of a cultural anthropologist it is certainly regrettable that the national costumes of many peoples have come to be replaced by a set of Middle Eastern gowns, creating monotony in place of creativity. I personally share this regret and seek solace in the fact that many local traditions have been able to hold their own despite that monotonous Middle Easternization following in the wake of Islam's advance.

I relate all this to illustrate what is meant by the creation of a homo *islamicus*, a kind of uniform human being, more conditioned by Islam than by any other tradition or particularism. Many scholars hold the view that it is law which has brought about that uniformity more than anything else. Islamic law, the *shari`a*, is in fact much more than law as Westerners today understand law. The *shari`a* is rather a comprehensive code of behavior. A modern slogan calls the *shari`a* "complete code of life." That is not wrong, although our Fundamentalists misuse this slogan in such a way that many Muslims have become allergic to it.

A complete code of life comprises ethics, and many common believers in various parts of the Muslim world do in fact understand the term *shari`a* to be roughly equivalent with *akhlaq*, the Arabic word for ethics. I guess this problem of distinguishing, or not distinguishing, between law and ethics exists in other cultures too. In the case of Islam, ethics came first. The law was formulated later in order to make ethics prevail. That is a rather complex affair because in the course of time these two tend to drift apart. Among Muslims that has been a debate for centuries. We have our scholars of the law, *shari`a*, and we have scholars of ethics, *akhlaq*. There is an age-old conflict between the scholars of the law and the teachers of ethics who feel that stagnation of the law has led to what are, from an ethical point of view, absurdities.

We might speak of a history of revolt against the law in Islam, a revolt in the name of ethics, a series of uprisings of the proponents of *akhlaq* against the professors of *shari`a*. This is what comes to mind immediately upon hearing Leonard Swidler talk of global ethics. Muslims who put ethics above and the law beneath will be thrilled to hear of this project. Those who take the *shari`a* as their shield without understanding the difference between *shari`a* and *akhlaq* will be apprehensive.

It will not be easy for any Muslims, including the Islamists, to say an outright "no" to such a project of a global ethic. However, the *shari`a* advocates will want the *shari`a* to be the global ethic. Confusing the law with ethics, they cannot but seek to impose their exclusivist vision on others. To sum up, there will be Muslims truly committed to the project and others who will seek to exploit it as a means of proselytizing.

What good is there in a global ethic, the defenders of the *shari`a* will argue, if it is not enacted--in other words, if the ethical principles or teachings are not converted into a law? At the same time they cannot accept any law other than the *shari`a*. Perhaps I am stating an extreme. We do of course have many scholars of the law who hold very rational views about the *shari`a*, who approach it from a historical angle and analyze it as a product in the making of which many outstanding personalities participated over a span of at least two centuries. In actual fact, the *shari`a* is the product of what was then an Islamic melting pot of races and cultures. Our Islamists, however, claim divine origin for the *shari`a*. What is divine is superior to what is human-made. Leonard Swidler's project of a global ethics can only result in a human-made product--hopefully a product made by as many women and men as possible.

Further difficulties lie, in my opinion, in the details of any universal global ethic, that is, in the difficult balance between universality and its specific binding force. Nothing is easier than to line up universal principles and have them approved. Then everyone goes about their implementation in his or her own manner. For example, we have just experienced with the collapse of the Soviet block how every concept has received a new meaning: The "peoples friendship" between East Germany and Poland was not the same as the "peoples friendship" between West Germany and France. The "freedom of the press" of the Communist *Neues Deutschland* was like the "freedom of the press" of the Nazi *Voelkischer Beobachter*, but had nothing to do with the "freedom of the press" of the West Berlin *Spandauer Volksblatt*, etc.

We cannot avoid conceptually specifying the general principles and thereby going somewhat into detail. If tomorrow in Tajikistan the "Peoples' Democracy" were replaced by an "Islamic Democracy" la Iran, we would have an experience of still more democratic rigambole, but we would have even less of the substance of democracy. Today, however, we are passing through a phase not very different from that of Soviet rule when a particular brand of Communism was enforced. Under that ideology many terms of our vocabulary became perverted. Rather than admit that they could not care less for democracy, the Soviets insisted on being the best

of democrats, and more than that, "people's democrats." This was imitated by not a few Muslim countries. A dictatorial regime in Algeria proclaimed a "Democratic and Popular Republic." Linguistically speaking that means the same thing three times. The Libyan People's *Jam hiriyah* means one and the same thing--a dozen times.

As for our Islamists, we are better off with the radical ones who openly say that there is "no democracy in Islam" and "Western" concepts of human rights cannot be reconciled with Islam. Much worse are those who speak of an "Islamic democracy" and "Islamic republic," but mean essentially the same that the Communists meant while talking about "popular democracy" and "people's republic." A group of so-called moderate Islamists even drafted an "Islamic Declaration of Human Rights." As a Muslim I would be less hesitant about signing a "Hindu Declaration of Human Rights" or a "Jewish Declaration of Human Rights." I know that there are Islamists around who just wait for someone like Leonard Swidler to hijack his global ethics.

No one has proclaimed in words so loudly in favor of the emancipation of women as the *Mullahcracy* in Iran. The most radical devotee of radical feminism could learn something from them. Even the German radical feminist publication Emma could not keep up with Khomeini. But what does that mean in practice? Almost the exact opposite. As gun-toters and as prison guards the women of Iran and the Sudan are good. That then is lifted up as progress beyond the traditionalist society, which never had such. Under the aegis of the *New Ideology of Islamism*, which is everything other than the *Old Religion of Islam*, a complete emptying of concepts of their content takes place. There in the name of the Islamic Republic and its emancipation of women women are sprayed with acid because a single lock of hair slipped out a little from under the required head covering.

Saudi Arabia has no state constitution because it allegedly needs none. We have the Qur'an, it is said. That is a fatuous fiddling with the Holy Book. This forces us, then, to really define, in pedantic manner, what we are claiming and what we want to achieve. Otherwise the same will happen to us as to those concerned with human rights. For example, it is insisted that no religious minority has it so good as do the Christians of Pakistan. This ideal solution is expressed in separate election lists: Muslims may vote only for Muslim candidates, Christians only for Christian. A Hindu may not receive any more votes than there are Hindu voters, even if the majority of the Muslims might prefer to vote for him because he is the most capable candidate, because he is more honest than the Muslim candidate.

Perhaps some Germans still remember Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, where it is so beautifully stated: "The male stork goes to the female stork, the male wolf to the female wolf, house mouse to house mouse and field mouse to field mouse."¹

In the "ideological state" of the Islamists the rights of women are better maintained than in any other system, and specifically through the fact that a few women were named as representatives of womanhood in the parliament. Men elect only men and women only women, if at all. Women Prime Ministers such as Khalida Zia in Bangladesh, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Tansu iller in Turkey are symptoms of a devilish Westernization, *gharbzadegi*, as the Islamists say. *Gharbzadegi* means something like "being dazzled by the glitter of the West and giving oneself over as a slave to it," with the resulting immorality.

The proponents of Islamism, the ideology of the nineties, would gladly be the first to sign the draft of a universal global ethic, as long as a long series of individual issues were not specified therein. They are also eagerly the first to engage in interreligious dialogue, to monopolize it so other Muslims--for instance, "heretics" like us--cannot participate. Afterwards in their publications in Arabic and Urdu, concerning interreligious dialogue they proclaim: That is the latest trick of the Christian missionaries after all other means to convert Muslims have failed. Concerning the draft of a universal global ethic, their comments behind closed doors would hardly be other.

What to do? A draft of global ethics cannot go into too much detail as this would jeopardize universal acceptance. But if it remains too unspecified, too vague, it will lead nowhere, because the first ones to sign will

be the perpetrators of genocide, such as Milosheвич and Karajich, Rafsanjani and Turabi. How, then, can one work out in detail such a global ethic and be just to all sides--I do not mean here the Islamists or similar Fundamentalists among Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and others. Let us leave that marginal group on the side, for it is already extraordinarily difficult to reach a consensus among the majority streams. An yet, it should be attempted. We should not limit ourselves to safe ground, but rather venture further--otherwise nothing will be gained. There is no longer a lack in our global village of well-intentioned declarations by the most various of committees of different concerns on the fundamental issues of the world community.

I mean that Leonard Swidler's initiative deserves to be taken seriously, that is, consistently worked out--which of course demands an immense amount of work, which would presume world-wide intensive discussions in buddhist monasteries, in the Vatican, in the Qarawiyyi (Morocco's theological university with an influence throughout West Africa), in the `Ulama Academy of Lahor in Pakistan, among Hindu Pundits and Chinese Party Ideologues.

For this purpose we must wrestle with the question whether the different cultures really think in thought categories which are different from one another, as the Fundamentalists on all sides eagerly maintain. In my opinion it makes an immense difference whether one speaks of the differing concepts of the different cultures, or of different thought categories. One can translate concepts or at least find approximate correspondents in other cultures. With thought categories it is more difficult.

I do not wish categorically to deny that there are such fundamentally different thought categories. On the contrary, everything which enriches human thought should be welcomed. But I have experienced how the slogan of different thought categories can be misused, how every discussion can be made impossible, how every understanding of one another can be sabotaged, for our Fundamentalists obstinately insist that "true Islam" cannot be understood or analyzed with the help of Western structures of thought. Nevertheless, they propose an unanalyzable unity which can be grasped only with their own categories--not, of course, through the comparative method.

Now and again all this will be presented in a significantly more learned manner than I am doing here. But the end effect is always the same, namely, the tireless pursuit of the distortion of the meaning of concepts and the dislocation of all such universalistic attempts as that by Leonard Swidler.

I gladly grant that as a Sufi-influenced Muslim I am not especially concerned about my uniqueness. However, I believe I can bring a certain understanding for those who in their religion are first of all concerned to maintain their uniqueness and their distinctness from others. The overcoming of this hurdle is certainly the most difficult barricade on the path to a global ethic, for with many there arises the fear that through such a global undertaking they could lose something of substance, could lose holding on to "their own." That is not absolutely the same as the above-mentioned rejection of syncretism. Rather, it is a very simple question: If we all contribute something, how much from me, then, will be taken up, how will it maintain itself alongside the other elements, will it play any role at all, or will it be hardly visible any more among the multiplicity of contributions?

I once wrote a dissertation on a modern Egyptian historian and language reformer who was also a religious scholar and reform thinker. During the forty years of his activity as editor of the cultural periodical *Ath-Thaqafa*, Ahmad Amin (d. 1954) concerned himself tirelessly with the thought of a "global marriage" of East and West ("Islamic Orient and Christian Occident"). In this he constantly asked about what would be brought along. What in our cultural heritage is appropriate to be taken up into the family community? What do we possess which we do not wish to give up, or indeed cannot give up? How do we adapt and how do we maintain our identity?

Those are all questions which will unhesitatingly be posed. Even when we give our signature to the draft because we have nothing further to add, we nevertheless would like to be visible in the final version.

I should like to explain a little more why I, as a Muslim, feel so affirmative about this project. After all, I am not a contemporary of the Prophet Muhammad, when *islam* was still to be written with a small "i," as the prototype of Abrahamic religion, not *Islam* with a capital "I," the world community of today, fourteen centuries later.

Our philosophical tradition knows of a famous parable which inspired three great minds who all wrote a book on Hayy Ibn Yaqzan, an Arabic name which in English means *The Living One Son of the Wake*. Being of Andalusian ancestry, I feel closest to the version presented by our twelfth-century philosopher Ibn Tufail. His Hayy Ibn Yaqzan is a human being growing up on an uninhabited island, reared by animals ever since he was placed there as a baby. In the course of a long life he discovers many laws of nature by sheer observation and by dint of his natural intelligence. Observation of animal life teaches him the rules of society and the reasons of social conduct. He becomes a deeply ethical being.

Late in his life *The Living One Son of the Wake* finally manages to get to another island with a large population and a social hierarchy. Society over there abides by a code of ethics taught to them by a prophet who had received it in the form of revelations from God. Hayy Ibn Yaqzan is wonderstruck to discover that those revelations say exactly the same as the conclusions he arrived at during his contemplations in complete solitude.

Ibn Tufail and the other philosophers wanted to tell us that ethics, to be true, must be universal. Whether we see their origin in the laws of nature or in divine revelations, the test of their truth is their universality. It is also a way of telling us to respect the ethics of other peoples, no matter whether they originate in a revelation from on high or whether they are the product of the human genius which, after all, we believe to be of divine grace too.

Without wanting to stretch the argument too far, I have sometimes asked myself whether there was not, at the back of our philosophers' minds, a realization of the oneness of humanity. As Muslims they had to believe in that anyhow, but it was a matter of taking practical steps in that direction. Islam had become yet another religion. Though it had brought a large chunk of humanity together, it was no longer exactly the platform for all to stand on, as the Prophet had envisioned it. It is now one more faith, in addition to those that always existed, plus some even younger ones. What, then, about the primordial aspiration to provide a common base for all?

I cannot vouchsafe that philosophers such as Ibn Tufail, Ibn Sin and As-Suhrawardi, who all wrote about *The Living Son of the Wake*, felt that the recognition of other peoples' ethical thought as equal with ours could be such a platform. Much less can I aver that they, and other Muslim philosophers, aimed at something like a global ethic. But at least I see no rejection of such a project. On the contrary, they were apparently heading in that direction.

I do expect objections to this project from a different corner, and that may be both Muslim and Non-Muslim. Leonard Swidler is a Catholic and an American. He is the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* and the author of the *Decalogue Dialogue*. As I have noted, Islamists eagerly participate in interreligious dialogue while warning against it in their Arabic and Urdu press as the latest trick of Christian missionaries wishing to convert Muslims. They tell their followers to participate in interreligious dialogue in order to use it against the Christian missions, in order to proselytize for Islam. It is important to be aware of this attitude because this is precisely the spirit with which they will approach the global ethic project. It may be possible to convince one or the other amongst them that the intention underlying the project is a very different one, but it would be fallacious to entertain any illusions and to be taken in by Islamist professions of interest in the project. Their wrongly conceived misgivings about it need to be addressed again and again.

Others will allege that such a project is typical of the rich North that can engage in such pastimes. Whether they call the United States "the West" or "the North," there will be objections to the project's provenance: The much maligned West/North never ceases to impose itself culturally on the underdogs in the East/South. This widespread notion will cause much resistance to the project, resistance that would not exist if Leonard Swidler were a native of Chad or a Hindu divine from the Tamil part of Sri Lanka. It seems advisable to preempt such antagonisms by addressing them beforehand.

Leonard Swidler and his collaborators from the Christian West simply should above all not allow themselves to be driven onto the horns of a dilemma. The protests against Western patronizing which are raised by some against his draft really appears to me to be rather threadbare. I *know* that many in the world of Islam, indeed, probably the majority, fundamentally have no problem with the project. Naturally there are also those who react to it allergically simply because it comes from America or from an American. However, we should not overreact, we should not thereby allow ourselves to be deterred. From the USA there comes not only Patriot and Stinger Missiles but also healing experiments in thought. The sooner people outside of America learn that, the better.

NOTE

1 "Der Storch geht zur Stoerchin, der Wolf zur Woelfin, Hausmaus aus Hausmaus und Feldmaus zur Feldmaus."