"Shared Values in Communal Life: Provisional Skepticism and the Prospect of a Global Ethic"

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This article examines the prospects for the development of a global ethic in a pluralistic and morally fragmented world. Arguing that a set of shared values, such as those proposed by Leonard Swidler and Hans Küng, must contend with the realities of human self-interest and social dislocation, the author seeks constructively to critique the project of a global ethic from a position of "provisional skepticism." In the final section, he considers some ways of overcoming provisional skepticism, arguing finally in favor of the development of a global civil society, which can embody and channel the diversity of moral perspectives within a diverse society into a set of common goals.

Introduction

There is much to find appealing about the idea of a global ethic. In its assertion of a set of universal moral standards, unifying the many religious traditions of the world beyond their doctrinal differences, it provides a challenging and exciting possibility for a new way of viewing our obligations to one another and to the world in which we live. The prospect of interreligious cooperation in the development of such a global ethic could potentially provide the foundation for a broadly based interfaith moral movement, the kind of thing that would truly have the potential to bring about a global transformation of our common life.

Additionally, there is much that is appealing in moral claims that seek to embrace the entire human family as a singular community. A set of shared communal values could provide a context in which our agreement on general principles of action and engagement could overcome entrenched relationships of suspicion, hatred, and violence, if only such a set of shared values could be found. The coupling of the idea of shared communal values and a global ethic, as in the recent work of Leonard Swidler, has a great deal of potential to provide just such a context of cooperation in the name of ending much of the interethnic and interreligious violence that has defined the past century.1

1Leonard Swidler deals with these issues in much of his vast corpus of writing. Some examples are After the Absolute: The Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990); The Study of Religion in an Age of Global Dialogue (with Paul Mojzes) (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000); and (as editor) For All Life: Toward a Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1999). Additionally, Hans Küng’s work on the idea of a global ethic has been particularly important for defining and elaborating the concept. See par-
At the same time, one cannot help but harbor reservations. What could be meaningfully said about shared values on a global scale? Can we speak of a "communal life" that stretches across the globe? It is not clear that we can speak meaningfully of such things within a major city such as Chicago, with its myriad neighborhoods, its ethnic and political divisions, its great gaps between the richest and the poorest. Nor is it clear that we can speak of such things within the United States today, with its much publicized divisions between the Red States and the Blue States; urban, rural and suburban; Republican, Democrat, and "None of the above." And none of this brings the question of religion into the matter. So, if we cannot speak of such things within one city or country, is it possible to imagine them as the result of the development of a global ethic? I am not sure, and so I must present myself here as a provisional skeptic regarding the prospect of a global ethic: a skeptic, for the reasons that I have begun to enumerate, but a provisional skeptic, for reasons that I hope will become apparent in the final section.

I will begin by describing the idea of a global ethic as it is presented primarily in the work of Swidler, paying particular attention to the principles of global dialogue that he has articulated as central to the development of a global ethic. I will then offer some reservations regarding the project as Swidler and others have expressed them. In the final sections, I will turn to some possible ways to overcome my provisional skepticism and present a theological rationale for embracing the project of a global ethic, despite those reservations.

This skepticism, it should be noted, does not preclude a great admiration for the project of a global ethic. The world may well be a better place because of it. I am simply unconvinced by the scope of its ambition. Nevertheless, by raising the possibility of a global ethic for the world's consideration, Swidler, Hans Küng, and others have created a new possibility in the world. And that new possibility offers grounds for hope.

I. The Idea of and Basis for a Global Ethic

Several key documents are central to an understanding of the idea of a global ethic. In this section I will focus only on a few of these documents, most particularly Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic (New York: Crossroad, 1993); and idem, A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics, tr. John Bowdon (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1997; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998 [orig.: Weltethos für Weltpolitik und Weltwirtschaft (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1997)].

crucially the "Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic," but also including the commentary on the declaration as offered by Swidler in several works. His perspective is crucial to understanding both the possibilities created by the quest for a global ethic and some of its potential pitfalls.

According to the "Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic," one can discover within the variety of religious traditions a set of common moral commitments, which arise from out of the particularities of the traditions (and, thus, are not mere abstractions), and which can act as bridges among the various traditions. As the Declaration states:

We make this commitment not despite our differences but arising out of our distinct perspectives, recognizing nevertheless in our diverse ethical and religious traditions common convictions that lead us to speak out against all forms of inhumanity and for humaneness in our treatment of ourselves, one another, and the world around us. We find in each of our traditions: 1) grounds in support of universal human rights; 2) a call to work for justice and peace; and 3) concern for conservation of the Earth.

These motivating values offer the basis for conversation and cooperation among members of different traditions "[i]n order to build a humanity-wide consensus" regarding this ethic. For this purpose, the Declaration continues, it is necessary to use "humanity-based" language, that is, language not rooted in any particular tradition but appealing to the broadest possible sector of the human community. These ideas, according to the Declaration, provide the rationale for the ethic.

On the basis of its rationale, the Declaration goes on enumerate several "presuppositions," which are largely based upon the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These presuppositions include such concepts as a recognition of the innate dignity of every human being, an acknowledgment of a universal human obligation to act morally, and an appeal to "[t]he great challenge of being human," which "is to act conscientiously" to develop human capabilities. Coupled with these presuppositions are affirmations of the human right to live and an acknowledgment of the human connection to the natural world.

The Declaration asserts the Golden Rule as "a fundamental principle" guiding a global ethic. Of particular note in the various versions of the Golden Rule (which exists in similar language across many religions) is that it roots morality...
not simply in doing good for the Other, but in relating the good of the Other to one’s own well-being. As Swidler and Mojzes note:

It is clear that the core of the world’s major religions, the Golden Rule, does not attempt the futile and impossible task of abolishing and annihilating the authentic ego. On the contrary, it tends to make concern for the authentic ego the measure of altruism. “Do not foster the ego more than the alter; care for the alter as for the ego”; “To abolish egoism is to abolish altruism also; and vice versa.”

A human and humanizing society should lead toward (w)holiness, toward altruism, but it cannot be built on the assumption that its citizens are (w)hole and altruistic to start with. Such an altruism must grow out of an ever-developing authentic self-love. It cannot be assumed, and surely it cannot be forced, as has been tried for decades—with disastrous and dehumanizing results.

The Golden Rule thus becomes the keystone that holds together the entire edifice of the Declaration. By offering a consensus statement that is at home in many traditions, it provides a basis for supporting the entire rest of the document. If we are to treat others as we wish to be treated, then we can extrapolate that principle into a comprehensive ethical vision.

All of this provides the basis for what follows: A list of basic principles that ought to govern a global ethic. Once again, these principles are rooted in ideals such as human freedom and dignity, respect for the earth and nonhuman life, the importance of love (as well as self-love), and the responsibility to act on that love for the sake of others. These basic principles are then used as a bridge to discuss what are referred to as “middle principles,” many of which echo and reiterate the general principles of the U.N. declaration. These middle principles are articulated in terms of mutual sets of rights and responsibilities that translate the values of the Golden Rule and the basic principles into general social guidelines, including such things as equality before the law, freedom of religion, and freedom of speech.

10Ibid., p. 184, quoting Bhagavan Das, The Essential Unity of All Religions [1934], p. 303.
11Swidler and Mojzes, Study of Religion, p. 184. It should be noted that not all commentators on the Declaration are as convinced as Swidler that the Golden Rule, as formulated in other traditions, would necessarily fit neatly into the Declaration’s interpretation of its implications. As John Hick notes: “I should . . . like to see independent attempts from within the Chinese, Indian, African and other cultural contexts to spell out the implications of the Golden Rule. It could be that these will all be broadly consonant with his draft. Or it could be that significant differences will emerge, which would then give rise to important dialogues” (John Hick, “Toward a Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic: A Protestant Comment” in Swidler, For All Life, p. 103). Some of the reflections from non-Western traditions are provided in the same volume. Significant in Hick’s comment is his recognition that agreement about the meaning of the Golden Rule is not a given, but it must arise through the mutual process of discernment and interpretation among the various participating religious traditions.
12In fact, though not stated explicitly, the Golden Rule can be understood to provide a basis not only for what follows it in the Declaration but also for what precedes it: the recognition of human rights, the call for justice and peace, and the ecological concern that make up the rationale for the Declaration, as well as the elements of its presuppositions. In that sense the Golden Rule is itself the presupposition of the presuppositions.
The significance of these middle principles is that they translate value statements into principles of public action and thus provide a basis for evaluating the degree to which a society does or does not conform to the principles of a global ethic. Additionally, by tying the idea of global ethics to a well-established set of human-rights guidelines, one that has been agreed to by the vast majority of countries in the world, it provides a further basis for its acceptance across a wide variety of cultural and political contexts. Of further significance is the way that these middle principles pair rights statements with responsibility statements. Thus, for example, the right to equality before the law is coupled with the responsibility to obey all just laws, just as the right to freedom of religion entails a corresponding obligation to respect the religious beliefs of others.

What the Declaration of a Global Ethic does not attempt to do is provide a detailed description of what would or would not constitute a well-ordered and ethical society. Swidler writes that the general character of the Declaration is necessary, since, if it “is to be meaningful and effective, its framers must resist the temptation to pack too many details and special interests into it. It can function best as a kind of ‘constitutional’ set of basic and middle ethical principles from which more detailed applications can be drawn.”

How Swidler conceives of the process by which a global ethic can be developed entails an understanding of what he means when he refers to the idea of “dialogue” as central to its development. We turn to consider this next.

II. Global Ethics and Global Dialogue

Dialogue, writes Swidler, differs from debate and discussion in crucial ways. Debate requires an argument in which there is a winner and a loser, but dialogue gains its distinctive character because it is not about winning or about changing the mind of one’s opponent. Rather, “[w]e enter into dialogue . . . primarily so that we can learn, change and grow, not so that we can force change on the other.” In order to do this, he argues, “each partner must listen to the other as openly and sympathetically as possible in an attempt to understand the other’s position as precisely and as much from within as possible.”

Swidler goes on to note that religious traditions have been slow to take up the task of engaging in dialogue with one another, viewing their own traditions as being sufficient, and perhaps exclusive, sources of wisdom and insight. Yet, Swidler argues, it is through dialogue that we may find a better way of pursuing truth. The increasing interdependence of human beings, through economic glob-
alization, ecological crisis, and an increasing global consciousness of mutuality and relationality, have opened the possibility of a new way of conceiving of the world—moving from a static conception of reality to a dynamic one—and a “deabsolutized” way of conceiving of truth.17

Deabsolutizing truth means embracing a conception of truth that is fundamentally relational, not seeing truth as the singular possession of one tradition or worldview, but as grounded in variable contexts. Various fields have already recognized that our ability to speak meaningfully of “truth” is limited by historical setting, social location, and the tools of interpretation that we use. To these insights Swidler adds the deabsolutization of truth via dialogue, in which “[t]he knower engages reality in a dialogue in a language the knower provides, thereby deabsolutizing all statements about reality.”18

By engaging reality through dialogue, we question the world in which we find ourselves, and the world responds to us. The language that we use affects the kinds of answers we receive, and thus may necessitate that we change our language in order to receive a more adequate response. We thus come to recognize reality as not simply an objective thing out there, but as contingent upon our relationship with it. Swidler writes: “With this new and irreversible understanding of the meaning of truth, the critical thinker has undergone a radical Copernican turn. . . . the paradigm shift in the understanding of truth statements has revolutionized all the humanities, including theology and ideology.”19

Even more crucial to the possibility of developing a global ethic that can be widely embraced, however, is the next level to which dialogue takes one, which Swidler refers to as “Deep-Dialogue.”

“Deep-Dialogue,” according to Swidler, is a “whole new way of thinking” in which we “stand on our position, and at the same time seek self-transformation through opening ourselves to those who think differently.”20 Coupled with the tools of “Critical-Thinking,” through “Deep-Dialogue,” we can come to a better understanding of the world, since it “is grounded in the primal field of Reality.”21 He writes:

To be fully human, then, it is vital that we be aware of both the limited, particular character of all statements, and at the same time the underlying unity within which differences can even appear. Therefore, because no single narrative, no single name can fully comprehend or name the Final First (thus recognizing the particularity of all language), we humans must also be in endless dialogue with each other in order to approach endlessly the infinite Ultimate Principle as an ever visible, yet ever receding, horizon (thus recognizing the underlying unifying dialogic context within which all language should ultimately be placed).22

This profound vision of unity-within-diversity has ethical implications that

17Ibid., p. 7.
18Ibid., p. 8.
19Ibid., pp. 11–12.
20Swidler and Mojzes, Study of Religion, p. 151.
21Ibid.
22Ibid., p. 154; emphasis in original.
serve as the groundwork for much of how Swidler interprets the task of developing a global ethic. If we are relational selves, fallible and limited, yet drawn together in dialogue, then our moral responsibilities to one another extend far deeper than the kind of moral minimalism that constitutes much of modern social engagement. Rather, as noted above, it entails a recognition of one another’s innate dignity, compelling us to love and responsibility toward one another: in other words, a set of communally shared values. Swidler considers the implications of this in an almost eschatological key, in terms of what he calls the coming “Age of Global Dialogue.” Swidler contrasts the Age of Dialogue with the current state of affairs, the “Age of Monologue.” He writes:

In the past, it was possible—indeed, unavoidable—for most human beings to live out their lives in isolation from the vast majority of their fellows, without even having a faint awareness of, let alone interest in, their very existence. At most, and for most, the occasional tale with distorted descriptions of faraway foreigners satisfied their curiosity. Everyone for the most part talked to his or her own cultural “self.” Even the rare descriptions of the “Other” hardly ever came from that Other; rather, it came from some of their own who had heard, or heard of, the Other. Put briefly, until the edge of the present era, humans lived in the Age of Monologue. That age is now passing.

Situated as we once were within our own cultural milieu, and with little to no contact with others who failed to share that milieu, we had no choice but to talk to ourselves. Faced as we now are with a multiplicity of ethnic, cultural, and religious “Others,” our choices are stark: “Today nuclear, ecological, or other catastrophic devastation lies just a little farther down the path of monologue. It is only by struggling out of the self-centered monologic mindset... that we can avoid such cataclysmic disasters.”

Implied in these statements is the suggestion that dialogue can overcome the forms of destructive division that separate us along arbitrary lines of social demarcation. By adhering to the ground rules for dialogue and moving into the realm of what he terms “Deep-Dialogue,” we can overcome these divisions and move toward a more cooperative conception of interpersonal and social relations.

Swidler is describing no less than a transformation of religious, cultural, and social life. The casual bonds of association that reflect so much in modern secular society would, in this vision, be replaced by a truly global community with a

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24Swidler and Mojzes, Study of Religion, p. 145.


set of shared values to govern its existence and to motivate this action. It is in many ways an attractive vision of a better world. Yet, it is in considering these implications that my reservations begin to arise: Can there really be such a thing as a global community? Can there be such a thing as a set of shared values that crosses cultural and social boundaries? How do we negotiate the shoals of political-power relations and the resource competition that affects so much of our common life?

My reservations are not that Swidler’s vision does not answer these questions but that his answers tend toward a utopian conception of human possibilities and are thus, in themselves, unconvincing. Still, the character of Swidler’s possibilities is seductive. Thus, although I must count myself a skeptic, I am a provisional skeptic.

III. Provisional Skepticism: Some Reservations Regarding a Global Ethic

A. Reservation One: The Problem of Community and Society

The idea of a community (Gemeinschaft) suggests a commonality of purpose and identity rooted in proximity and familiarity. Such associations are regulated by both formal and informal systems of sanction and discipline based upon personal association. They possess, as Ferdinand Tönnies put it, a “unity of will” that supersedes individual self-interest in the name of a larger holistic good. While Tönnies’ definition of community is certainly up for debate, any proponent of a global conception of communal values must offer an understanding of community that would allow it to exist on a global level. At the very least, the concept of community carries with it a presumption of a shared communal identity, which is difficult to achieve, while at the same time recognizing and embracing the irreducible religious and cultural diversity of the world. Were we to insist on a global conception of community, for what would we have to exchange it, and what would be the cost of such an exchange?

A far more persuasive way of framing the issues at stake would involve a focus not on the unitary idea of “community” but, rather, on the way in which

28Ibid., p. 37.
various and diverse communities may come together—not necessarily based on shared values but on shared need. This does not necessitate an organic vision of the common social good that brings us together under one communal umbrella. To extend the metaphor, there is simply the need to get in from out of the rain.

In that case, the issue is less one of shared values necessary for communal life and more the minimum conditions necessary to maintain a civil social life. Again, consider Chicago. Like many major metropolitan areas, it is a socially diverse city with many, many problems. From time to time, it does not seem to function particularly well; yet, in the main, it works—not because it has found a way to unify competing claims on public resources and common goods but precisely because it has found a way to negotiate the shoals of those various disputes. The costs of such negotiation are clear: The rich still prosper at the expense of the poor; neighborhoods often languish in neglect until they become the next target of gentrification; Chicago is the third most racially segregated city in the United States; and its citizens struggle to find ways to communicate across communal religious and ethnic boundaries. While Chicago sometimes seems to teeter on the edge of chaos, we Chicagoans generally stick together out of a tacit recognition that, bad as things may be, chaos is worse. Such a recognition does not require that we form a unified community, nor does it mean we must do so on a global level. It is Tönnies’ conception of society rather than community that can provide resources for this kind of collaboration.

Any effective global political order will be one rooted in a social conception of common life, bringing together a wide diversity of communities in the name of greater cooperation and self-preservation. Such a conception of political order need not be based upon cynical calculation or Realpolitik. On the contrary, cooperation can be rooted in the very core values of the various communities that make up a larger global society. But, these various core values cannot be—

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Footnotes:


32Tönnies, Community and Society, pp. 33–34.

and, I would argue, must not be—collapsed into a single, unitary conception of the good.

If society (Gesellschaft), rather than community, can serve as the basis for a common global political agenda, then it needs to be understood that such an agenda cannot be developed out of an automatic presumption of anybody’s good will. Absent the kind of “unity of will” found, for example, in families and small villages, a social conception of the good has to be achieved through a process of negotiation, which means reckoning with questions of power. This contemplation of power brings me to my second reservation.

B. Reservation Two: The Problem of Power in Politics

Meditating on the question of power in politics, Max Weber observed that, whenever one chooses to participate in political life, one does so at the risk of one’s very soul.\(^{34}\) Politics is the realm of legitimate coercive force, and it presumes, therefore, a value system that acknowledges the necessity of coercion, sometimes warfare, and perhaps even murder under certain circumstances. Under the best of circumstances, politicians have a wide degree of latitude as to when these means will be used, but Weber is clear that these are the unique and particular means of politics.\(^{35}\) No value system that rejects violence as a means can meaningfully take part in political life. It is by definition excluded.\(^ {36}\)

The politician’s task, according to Weber, is fairly narrowly circumscribed. The politician’s function is to represent his constituency. As such, the politician has an obligation to set aside scruples and concern with universal ethical principles and serve the interests of his people.\(^ {37}\) This presents a significant challenge to any attempt to reflect on the relationship of politics to ethics, because, at least as Weber conceives of it, the ethic of responsibility that stands at the heart of the politician’s task runs on a different, perhaps even contradictory, path to that of a global ethic.\(^ {38}\) A global ethic calls us to a consideration of the good of all—those within our borders and those beyond our borders—but an ethic of responsibility insists that, however virtuous such concerns may be, they are extraneous to the task of the politician. A concern for the outsider, for the stranger, for the foreigner, for the international community, or for the earth itself can only be justified on the basis of the good for the politician’s own constituency. It is for this purpose that the politician is given the power and authority to use violence.

Power and interest, then, are two important considerations that need to be brought into any conversation about the political implications of a global ethic. To be clear, Weber does not advocate the acquisition of power for power’s sake,\(^ {39}\) nor does he totally divorce power from morality. On the contrary, as Michael Walzer argues, we want good people to wield power because we know


\(^{35}\)Ibid., p. 78.

\(^{36}\)Ibid., pp. 119ff.

\(^{37}\)Ibid., p. 116.

\(^{38}\)Ibid., p. 120.

\(^{39}\)Ibid., p. 116.
that they may be called upon to do evil.\textsuperscript{40} We want our politicians to engage in necessary evils (and only strictly necessary evils), but we want them to feel guilty about it.\textsuperscript{41} From this perspective, perhaps we could say that we might desire as leaders those who embrace a global ethic—precisely because they are the only ones who can be trusted to betray it when necessary and only when necessary.

Reinhold Niebuhr offers a different approach to these questions. He explored the question of egoism and self-interest in political life in some detail.\textsuperscript{42} In contrast to Weber, Niebuhr concerned himself with the idea of Christian moral responsibility in society. The foil for his attacks was a pointlessly optimistic and politically naïve theological liberalism, which held that social change could take place through embracing a powerless, noncoercive love for one’s neighbor. Niebuhr agreed that love was characterized precisely by a rejection of power, but he argued that for this very reason the Christian who wishes to make a change in the world must do so by rejecting love as a normative political category.\textsuperscript{43} Justice, instead, is willing to get down in the muck and mire of political reality and fight tooth and claw to overcome oppression, cruelty, tyranny, and subjugation.\textsuperscript{44} To believe in the need to fight for political change means to eschew the highest moral ideals of humanity—in the name of the second highest. It is to strive for the penultimate, because the ultimate is out of reach.\textsuperscript{45}

The question that needs to be addressed by a global ethic is whether it is, in Niebuhrian terms, an ethic of love, eschewing power, or an ethic of justice, willing to use power to overcome evil. If global dialogue is the only way that such a global ethic may be legitimately promoted, it may be that this ethic cannot make peace with the need for power. As such, it may not have the capacity to provide more than a broad and indistinct set of inspirational ideals, which at best will sustain political leaders even when they find themselves contemplating their dirty hands. But, at worst, such ideals will simply crumble against the reality of concrete political necessity. To avoid this possibility, a global political ethic must be defined specifically with regard to questions of violence, power, and interest.

A third way of conceiving of the problem of power and morality in politics is suggested by Küng. He asks how the middle principles of the Declaration of a Global Ethic can be translated into concrete political circumstances. For Küng, as for Swidler, the issue is fundamentally one of survival. Only by embracing the broader social implications of a global ethic can we avert the ecological and political disasters that are the result of modernity, particularly the instrumental-

\textsuperscript{41}Ibid., pp. 167–168.
\textsuperscript{43}Ibid., pp. 263ff. See also Reinhold Niebuhr, \textit{An Interpretation of Christian Ethics} (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).
\textsuperscript{44}Niebuhr, \textit{Moral Man}, pp. 233ff. The dialectic of love and justice was a continual theme in Niebuhr’s writing, which finds its most developed expression in his \textit{The Nature and Destiny of Man}, Gifford Lectures, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964 [orig., 1941 and 1943]).
izing tendency of modern political and economic life.\textsuperscript{46} To walk ourselves back from the precipice of disaster, we must go beyond insisting on the inviolability of our rights to embracing the idea that we have responsibilities that extend toward the whole world.

Whereas Swidler's conception of responsibility is kept purposely general, Küng is more willing to enter into the specifics of political and economic life. In terms of politics, this means steering a middle path between the cynical calculation of Realpolitik, as typified in the example of Henry Kissinger, and a naïve, moralizing idealism that he associates with Woodrow Wilson's "crusade for democracy" after World War I.\textsuperscript{47}

Kissinger stands as the prime example of the kind of "realism" that has thrown off the illusion that politics is a moral realm. Politics, for Kissinger, was about interest, and about calculating how nations could best achieve their interests. The models for political action for Kissinger do not include those for whom political triumphs were also moral triumphs (such as Vaclav Havel and Mahatma Gandhi), but a different species of political figure altogether:

Even leaving aside Gandhi and King, Walesa and Havel, there can be no doubt that Kissinger admires not so much American politicians like Jefferson, Madison, and Franklin, who were concerned to achieve a balance of ideals and interests, as European power politicians of the stamp of Richelieu, Metternich, Palmerston, Disraeli, and Bismarck. Even Stalin (whose tremendous crimes are, of course, mentioned) comes off better with his cool and calculating foreign policy than an "idealistic" American president like Franklin D. Roosevelt (though his strategic errors over Stalin, "Uncle Joe", cannot be disputed).\textsuperscript{48}

But, if our only alternatives are naïve idealism or cynical realism, what hope can there be that society will reflect the deepest values of its members?

Küng argues that the solution must be found in rejecting this dichotomy and embracing a form of "responsible politics," "which combines a sober perception of interests with a basic ethical orientation."\textsuperscript{49} In a certain sense, this necessitates a transvaluation of political values, to a point where it is possible to conceive of one's very real political interests in broader terms than those in which they are usually conceived. This entails understanding national or political interests as existing "interdependently" with the interests of others: "So national interests are not to be brought into play naively or even demagogically. They have to be accounted for ethically, not only in the 'cabinet' which is directly responsible for policies, but . . . before the forum of the nation (and often even of the nations)."\textsuperscript{50} In the final analysis, in politics "[o]nly an ethic of responsibility is of

\textsuperscript{46}Küng, Global Responsibility, p. xv.
\textsuperscript{47}Küng, A Global Ethic, p. 35.
\textsuperscript{48}Ibid., pp. 8–9 (emphasis in original).
\textsuperscript{49}Ibid., p. 59.
\textsuperscript{50}Ibid., p. 63. Küng endorses Andrew Scott's proposal "that states should be encouraged to develop interests centred on the international system of states" as "'a useful way of smuggling the idea of responsibility into the national interest, thereby adding a genuinely positive dimension to a concept that is normally associated with purely selfish state behaviour'" (ibid., p. 64 [quoting J. C. Gar-
any use for a new world order. It presupposes a conviction, but realistically seeks the predictable consequences of a particular policy, especially those that can be negative, and also takes responsibility for them.  

In other words, only by emphasizing that the interest of each nation is bound up inexorably with the good of the whole of humanity, that the individual good is only achievable alongside the common good, can the substantive ethical principles embodied in a global ethic overcome political calculation and collective self-interest. This theme needs to be developed in light of the potentially contrary—or potentially complementary—conception of dialogue as Swidler has defined it. We must come to terms with how a global ethic may participate in and take advantage of the political realm in the interests of morality.

C. Reservation Three: The Pitfalls of Dialogue

If the prospects for a global ethic are tied to the possibility of a dialogical transformation of human relating and knowing, then it becomes particularly important to be aware of the pitfalls that relying on dialogue presents for the development of a publicly viable political ethic. Political life, as noted above, rests on the negotiation of questions of power. Dialogue, in contrast, works most effectively when issues of power are laid aside in the interest of understanding. Is there any way to reconcile the two?

My reservation on this score is primarily based in theological anthropology. If one believes, as Swidler seems to, that human beings are capable of remarkable and widespread transformations of the kind necessary to avert the disasters that he fears, then it is plausible to believe that a new paradigm of dialogue can provide the foundation for such a transformation. The new Age of Dialogue that he envisions depends on a conception of human reason as “dialogical at its core.” He understands “Deep-Dialogue” as a virtue that develops through practice, “a powerful transformative process that eventually must become a habit of mind and spirit.”

But, what if human beings are not dialogical by nature but, rather, egotistical? What if the tendency to think in terms of tribe and kin, which separates us from other human beings, is deeply embedded in the evolutionary development of the human species, perhaps even down to our DNA? In more theological terms, what happens if, despite our own best intentions, we are unavoidably beset by the problem of Original Sin? If the value of dialogue is dependent on its potentially globally transformative character, then the persistence of human self-assertion, domination, violence, and warfare would seem to count against our
capacity to avoid catastrophe through dialogue. However, it need not be so.

The validity of dialogue as a means of coming to mutual understanding and overcoming divisions of religion and culture still stands, but only if we embrace a more modest conception of dialogue. The success of dialogue can be gauged in pragmatic terms on the basis of the actual discourse that takes place among differing groups. Rather than insist upon transformation as the end result of the process of dialogue, we may better hope for greater understanding and perhaps for interim agreements and negotiations of the common cultural and political territory possessed by the variety of viewpoints that co-exist in a pluralistic society. We may work together, in such circumstances, on an ad hoc basis, without necessarily insisting on a fundamental change of human character as the result.

At times, this has seemed to be an element of the project as articulated by Swidler. As he wrote in After the Absolute:

We must build our theological language, categories, and images on our humanity, which we all—the traditional Jew, Christian, Muslim, the modern critical thinker, Hindu, Buddhist, Marxist—share in common. To the extent that we can formulate our religious and ideological insights in such humanity-based language, we will be building a “universal theology of religion-ideology.” In other words, we must attempt to cast our religious and ideological insights in language “from below,” from our humanity, rather than “from above,” from the perspective of the transcendent or the divine. We must attempt to develop a theological language “from within,” not “from without.” We must try to speak a language of immanence, not of transcendence. . . . This new theological language might be called a theological-ideological Esperanto, for like Esperanto, it is intended as an intercultural language that borrows from various living languages. But it is so simplified, so rational, so generally human, that anybody with the knowledge of one’s native tongue and a slight smattering of others will easily be able to master it.

If this theological-ideological Esperanto can be separated from the more sweeping anthropological claims that Swidler makes elsewhere, this may provide a basis for dialogue that can be practically effective in overcoming partisan strife and division. It would have to depend not on the transformation of human nature but on the creation of local communities, committed to conversation as a mode of understanding and to cooperation as a matter of mutual aid and support. This could provide the basis for an ethic of global cooperation as part of a genuinely global civil society.

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56 Swidler, After the Absolute, p. 56; emphasis in original. Swidler’s use of the idea of Esperanto as a way of understanding the project of developing a common moral language bears a resemblance to the use of the same term by Jeffrey Stout in his Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1988). Swidler also discusses this idea in his Toward a Universal Theology of Religion (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987). Of particular importance is how religions maintain their particularity in light of pluralism in interfaith dialogue. One important contribution to this discussion is S. Mark Heim’s Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

57 Jeffrey Stout has argued persuasively, however, that Esperanto is the wrong linguistic metaphor to describe communication across cultural barriers. Instead, he advocates for the idea of a socioethical form of Creole, a more ad hoc form of linguistic improvisation. See his Ethics after Babel.
IV. Global Civil Society: A Way Past Provisional Skepticism?

The idea of civil society has gained a great deal of attention over the past decade, providing as it does a way of conceiving of social relationships that neither reduces human beings to atomized individuals nor subsumes their identities beneath the power of the State. Civil society provides a mediating sphere of human existence, allowing groups to form around sets of common commitments. As such, it encompasses a great many different types of groups—from charitable organizations to activist groups, from human-rights centers to educational foundations. Through them, we can create and practice identities and participate in chosen aspects of public life. It aids the integration and socialization of individuals into the larger social whole. As individuals seek to define themselves, civil society can also aid them in making sense and meaning of their lives. The innately pluralistic character of civil society provides myriad avenues to public participation and aids in the development of a civic consciousness.

Because institutions of civil society exist apart from national identity or government direction, they can cross boundaries between countries and cultures. They can infiltrate a variety of cultural settings and bring individuals together on an international and potentially global scale to forge a common identity and engage in common projects. This prospect for a global civil society has the potential to provide a groundwork for the kind of dialogue among individuals and groups that can best serve to foster acceptance of the idea of a global ethic. It also provides a setting where something like an “ecumenical Esperanto” can be developed and practiced. The idea of a global civil society’s promoting a global

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58There is no one definition of civil society. The term is ancient (dating at least to Aristotle’s description of the Politike Koinonia) and has been given many descriptions in the modern era. What these various descriptions share is their conception of civil society as a realm of association independent of the state. For a history of the idea of civil society, see Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, Civil Society and Political Theory (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992). Among the resources that discuss these various aspects of civil society, see Bellah et al., The Good Society; Bellah et al., Habits of the Heart; Robert N. Bellah, The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Corwin Smidt, Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003); Robert D. Putnam, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); and Robert D. Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein, Better Together: Restoring the American Community (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).

ethic potentially incorporates the work of church and parachurch entities, civic organizations, and nongovernmental organizations as venues for the promotion of values, specifically the values of a global ethic. Writing in a different vein, David Held and Anthony McGrew have pointed to the potential for global civil society to transform civic relations internationally:

With the global communications revolution, citizens' groups and NGOs have acquired new and more effective ways to organize across national frontiers and to participate in the governance of global affairs . . . Whereas for much of the twentieth century international diplomacy was essentially an activity conducted between consenting states, the existence of suprastate organizations, such as the UN and the WTO, has created new arenas in which the voice of peoples—as opposed to simply governments—is increasingly heard. Some view this as a global associational revolution in which citizens, communities and private interests organize to influence the conduct and content of global governance . . . Across the entire global agenda, on issues from the ecological to the ecumenical, NGOs and transnational movements give expression to the concerns and interests of an emerging transnational civil society.61

The plurality of outlets through which individuals can participate in civil society creates many opportunities for interaction. Individuals of different backgrounds, ideologies, and cultures can come to communicate within the context of transnational civic institutions, and dialogue becomes not only possible but necessary. These institutions can thus potentially become the setting for transformative encounters.

The idea of global civil society offers to the moral reflection on the possibility of a global ethic a conceptual modesty in how a global ethic can gain adherents. As associated individuals begin to promote the values inherent in their own idea of a global ethic, these values begin to spread across national and cultural boundaries. The process works in the opposite direction as well: As organizations promoting the values of a global ethic become more widespread, individuals have more opportunities to participate in the process of moral formation that would lead—if not to Swidler’s transformative breakthroughs—at least to a greater respect for human rights and a better-developed ecological consciousness.62

That the emergence of institutions of global civil society may produce such

61 Held and McGrew, Globalization/Anti-Globalization, p. 68.
62 Something akin to this is discussed in the closing sections of Darrell J. Fasching and Dell Dechant, Comparative Religious Ethics (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001). They note that individuals have to negotiate different identities, depending upon their setting and role. “The ethical task is to accept responsibility for the actions of all of our diverse selves” (Fasching and Dechant, Comparative Religious Ethics, p. 304). This entails coming to grips with the “social ecology” in which we find ourselves. “In a world where we have to juggle multiple identities, most institutions compete with each other for our absolute loyalty. Only a few—religious communities, universities, eco-justice organizations, human rights organizations (if they are doing their job properly)—nurture narratives that ask us not to give our ultimate loyalties to it as one more institution, but rather to weigh our loyalties against each other in light of a commitment to eco-justice and human dignity for all, especially the stranger” (Fasching and Dechant, Comparative Religious Ethics, p. 307).
possibilities is no guarantee that it will produce them. Civil society is a human artifact, with all of the failings and limitations of any human artifact. Mediating institutions can be affected by greed, egoism, and self-seeking just as individuals can. They can become repressive and authoritarian just as governments can. They can lapse into tribalism and competition that works against rather than for a larger conception of the common good. In short, global civil society is no panacea for the problems inherent in promoting a global ethic.

Nevertheless, reflecting on the idea of global civil society offers the idea of a global ethic a venue, one or more settings through which a set of values might begin to penetrate into a wider cultural acknowledgment. Indeed, to the degree that so much of the idea of a global ethic reflects the work of the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it has already won many adherents through the work of organizations such as Amnesty International and Médecins sans Frontières. To the degree that the concept of human rights has become much used (and often abused) in global discourse, the acceptance of a global ethic is well under way. However, the wider, and much more radical, implications of a global ethic have yet to be embraced and are unlikely to be fully realized. Particularly to the degree that a global ethic requires the wholesale transformation of human consciousness through dialogue (rather than small-scale transformations of persons and groups, as I would prefer), my reservations remain.

V. The Kingdom of God and a Global Ethic: Overcoming Provisional Skepticism

Despite my reservations, my enthusiasm for the possibility of a global ethic wants to break free of the provisional skepticism in which I have enclosed it. Perhaps I may now begin to let it out, if only briefly, for the characteristic component of my skepticism is that it is a provisional and not an absolute skepticism. It is a skepticism that wants to believe, if its doubts can be overcome. Why, then, is it only provisional? Why not absolute?

In the final analysis, I cannot remain skeptical of a global ethic because, as a Christian, I see embodied in the promise of a global ethic exactly that which stands at the heart of my faith: an anticipation of God’s coming reign. A global ethic calls human beings to a higher standard of moral performance than we have been willing to attempt up to this point in our history. By calling us beyond race, class, tribe, and faith, a global ethic offers an imaginative glimpse of a single humanity, a society united in a vision of the good—however limited, tentative, or minimal—toward which we might strive together. It offers a basis for a common work for a better world, for less-divided cities, less-divided nations,

and a less-divided world. The possibility of a global ethic, even amid ambiguities and complexities of the "forensically fraught"64 world of politics, creates a common horizon toward which we may strive, both as individuals and as participants in a pluralistic, diverse, and multifarious social body.

Politics is replete with moments of moral disappointment. Regardless of what political parties or movements we endorse, we are bound to find ourselves disillusioned and discontented from time to time. Yet, there are also graced moments in public life, when the various warring factions of self-interest and corruption recognize the possibility of reconciliation, of moving past the rule of violence in political life toward new possibilities of dialogue, and of cutting against the presumptions of power and privilege in the name of a larger ideal. An example of this is the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.65

Such moments are fleeting and are possible only because of the prior work of people dedicated to transformation. Even where it does take place, it may not be sustained unless there is a broad consensus in its favor. In South Africa, it was the leadership of Desmond Tutu that allowed for the Truth and Reconciliation commission to come into existence and a desire by the majority of South Africans to overcome past divisions that allowed its work to proceed. However, its success was only partial, and it shows what can go wrong, even in those graced moments of political transformation. The human capacity for evil, our "love of sinning" as one Christian hymn puts the matter,66 always exerts a counter-pressure on our attempts to renew and transform our public life. At its best, what we can hope for from a global ethic is to give us the resources to resist that counter-pressure, to call our political leaders to account in the name of a set of moral ideals that are embraced by Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and the myriad other faith traditions that dwell together in diverse constellations of association throughout the world.

To the degree that reflecting on a global ethic begins to forge links across national and international boundaries, to create real relationships in the midst of difference, to overcome the legacy of hatred and war and death that is the inheritance of most of the major religious traditions of the world, to build new institutions and associations dedicated to the creation of a truly civil society, then it offers up the possibility, the concrete hope, the eschatological anticipation of a genuinely peaceable realm.

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