

THE CHALLENGE OF GLOBAL ETHICS: LEARNING AND ORGANIZING

by William E. Lesher

Abstract. This is a response from the point of view of religion to three articles—by Ewert Cousins, David Loye, and Solomon H. Katz—that together call for a decisive new moral grounding for the human race. This commentary calls on science, as the dominant power in society today, to initiate a new partnership with religion. It goes on to advocate for an urgent mutual-learning endeavor in which science and religion will derive needed information and understanding from each other. The commentary finds a common thread in the three articles—that religion informed by science is the principal force capable of stimulating a global moral transformation—and ends by proposing a series of concrete action steps.

Keywords: global ethic; interfaith; Parliament for the World's Religions; religion-science dialogue; spiritual; transformation.

The thesis of this commentary can be stated briefly: Given the prophetic content of these three subject articles with their clarion warnings about this *kairos* moment in human evolutionary history, science must convince religious leaders that religion has a critical role to play in the radical transformational changes now required in the human species and must form a partnership with religion for the salvation of the planet Earth.

I put the challenge this way on the basis of personal experiences, two of which I recount here. First, in the mid-eighties, I was one of two representatives from the northern hemisphere to a task force on theological education in Africa. At one of the annual meetings of this group, a Swedish sociologist who had studied African political, social, and economic affairs

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for more than twenty years was invited to address the group. After giving a dismal analysis of the prospects for African economic development for the next century, the speaker proceeded to challenge these Christian church leaders by saying that the only NGO (non-governmental organization) in Africa today that can make a difference in the short run is the church. He followed with these three reasons: the church has the confidence of the people, it is both grass roots and global, and it operates with a vision of hope.

The second experience took place in the late eighties. The newly formed Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the denomination to which I belong, held a conference titled "The Year 2000 and Beyond." Several scientists addressed the conference in terms not unlike the content of these papers; they described the current view of the universe, employing the latest scientific information from their various disciplines, called for radical human transformation to meet the exigencies of our situation, and made it clear that the religions of the world have a decisive part to play in this scenario.

The response was similar in both instances. Church leaders were surprised by the warmth and openness of the speakers and at their obvious eagerness to share their knowledge in these forums. But they were, for the most part, overwhelmed at the suggestion that they, their organizations, and the religious enterprise as a whole are pivotal in equipping the human species with a moral-spiritual awareness and a globally sensitive value system capable of meeting the imminent challenges to human survival. They appeared rather to respond like Moses to the call of God ("Who am I?") or like Isaiah ("I have unclean lips") or like Peter ("Depart from me").

From within a "mainline" American religious tradition, these responses are quite understandable. Progressive religion in America today has a historically inflicted inferiority complex. The articles under consideration vividly spell out the reasons. Solomon Katz begins by announcing that science is "stretching the limits" and delving into the problems and the dilemmas of the contemporary world in the way that spiritual leaders have done in the past. Later he speaks of the dominance of science, the scientific challenge to the foundations of the Judeo-Christian myth in Europe, the resultant decline in purpose that is the basis of morality in the West, and also of the increased difficulty these religions have in adjusting their explanations of life and the creation to the rapidly changing accounts of the origins of the universe and the nature of the human species that emerge from science.

David Loye speaks of the displacement of religion as the source for morality and ethics and alludes to the falling away of the many people who at one time embraced these faith traditions. Indeed, this latter point has occupied the energies of much of the progressive religious leadership of our country, causing its attention to be focused on reorganizing declining

structures, with emphasis on the internal maintenance of their faith tradition, and withdrawing to some extent from public concerns.

In addition, many progressive religious leaders are painfully aware of the decline of their place in social structures of the modern world. They believe that the wisdom of their traditions is relevant to life today. In growing numbers they are eager to work at the creative task of correlating the revealed truth claims of their faith to modern sources of scientific knowledge. But they must be credentialed for that task. Science, as the dominant force in shaping and explaining the world today, needs to seek, solicit, and encourage the help of religious leaders in the critical tasks of developing “new moral leadership” (Katz), “a global ethic” (Loye), and “a global spiritual community” (Cousins). “Progressive scientists” (Loye’s term) need to convince religious leaders (not only academic theologians but also community priests, ministers, rabbis, and imams) from the evidence of their scientific investigations that their contributions are critical to the integration of knowledge needed to create the conditions for the development of a new moral leadership. As that task begins to take shape, it is obvious that the forces of organized religion will be needed to address the massive undertaking of deploying a new global spirituality that is informed by current scientific understandings.

It is important that science, as the dominant power in shaping modern secular thought about the world and its future, take the initiative in building a new public consortium with religious leaders and thinkers. To date, such initiative has not been considered germane to scientific interests. The few places where I am aware of scientists’ and religious leaders’ working on the crucial issues addressed in these articles are all initiated, sponsored, and financed largely by religious individuals and institutions. My response to these prophetic articles that call for a decisive new moral grounding for the human race is a challenge to scientists themselves, individually and collectively, to see the importance of their role as initiators, sponsors, and supporters of a new and vigorous relationship between science and religion. The forming of a science-religion consortium that focuses on the integration of ancient wisdom and modern scientific findings and insights is the kind of dramatic development that is big enough and new enough to be regarded by the peoples of the world and their leaders as a unique global undertaking.

There are, of course, obstacles from the sides of both science and religion to ever forming such a consortium on a large scale. Loye cites three major hurdles from the side of science, the most critical of which, he claims, is the well-known basic bias of the prevailing scientific paradigm against anything that may smack of values, let alone morality. A similar bias is prevalent in most constituencies of religious communities throughout the world, who see science in demonic terms, displacing divine faith with human formulations of truth. At this relatively early point in a new, fresh,

life-saving relationship between science and religion, all those who would be participants must recognize the minority status of this union. They must work to broaden their numbers, but more important, they need to be convinced that “forces that have been at work for centuries have in our day reached a crescendo,” a *kairos*, a fullness of time (in religious terms), “that has the power to draw the human race into a global network and the religions of the world” (in consort with modern science) “into a global spiritual community” (Cousins 210).

So what is to be done?

I suggest two courses of action: (1) that science and religion engage in mutual learning, and (2) that a broad-based organizational effort be mounted.

MUTUAL LEARNING

There is a wealth of information in these three subject papers that religious leaders in general and Christian pastors in particular (only because this is my frame of reference) can feast on and that could initiate a very fruitful ongoing discussion. Here are a few examples.

The concept of the mythic family has direct application to the life and bonded relationships that exist between believers in all the major religious traditions even to this day. It provides, as Katz states, “the mechanism for coherent cooperation to extend well beyond the immediacy of . . . kin relations’ altruism” (p. 246). Saint Paul gave eloquent shape and image to the mythic family in the Christian tradition by asserting that all believers have been baptized into the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and are, therefore, part of the body of Christ in the world today and throughout the ages. The image of the mythical family is both an anthropological insight and a live reality in today’s religious communities. One of my present projects, for example, is the development of a global electronic network that will link, first, all the Lutheran seminaries of the world and then, through them, the one hundred twenty international Lutheran church bodies. This is a way to bring the members of one mythical family in Christ into closer communion with one another by employing the means of modern technology. Learning the scientific evidence for a current practice that is a major factor in my personal faith and current activity is exciting and thought-provoking, and invites discussion and further exploration. The fact that this same widened kin relationship is also associated with potential conflict between religions and societies presses for a reconsideration of this larger “bondedness” of religious communities and calls for a dramatic rethinking by every religious group about how mythical kinship needs to function in a pluralistic, multi-faith world.

The discussion of axial consciousness in the first millennium B.C.E. during which many of the world’s religions took shape (Cousins 211) and that

gave rise to more individual religious concepts and practices that directed people toward spirit and away from the earth is a thesis that could be a fruitful catalyst in the developing interfaith dialogues that are springing up across this country and around the world. Likewise, the description of the second axial period as “global consciousness” helps to undergird the fledgling efforts of those current religious leaders who are involved in the development of interfaith discussions and organizations, sometimes over the objections of their superiors and their supporters. Insights of this kind, from outside the boundaries of a particular faith tradition, can embolden and encourage religious explorers and pioneers in a world of many faiths.

Loye finds such foundational religious virtues and values as goodness, partnership, and love anchored in the biocultural history of the human race. Katz finds it “reasonable to suggest that religion is a species characteristic of *Homo sapiens* and that religious ritual is probably as old as the species” (p. 246). Informed by this kind of scientific support, progressive religious leaders are far more likely to join with scientists to explore together the ways and means to work at new formulations of human ethics. What sources are people drawing on today to constitute their purpose and morality? What is the residual ability of the ancient myths to create new ethical formulations? What can we know about the effect of current attempts in some religious quarters to modify the rituals of the past with contemporary language and forms? Can the ancient traditions of faith, correlated with current scientific explanations, be renewed and restored as vital sources of meaning and morality? Such questions come quickly to mind when religious leaders consider the possibility of a dialogue with scientists around the issues in these papers.

Woven through the three papers is a trilogy of interacting problems that has triggered the concern of these authors, causing them to present their material, in part at least, in apocalyptic terms. They are: uncontrollable population growth, an insatiable desire for material goods, and a threatening environmental catastrophe. Katz, in particular, warns that meeting these challenges will require “such vast sacrifice and wisdom that their solution seems almost impossible” (p. 239). Religion does have an unusual if not a unique capacity to inspire sacrifice from its adherents. This scientifically identified trilogy of issues has the best chance to become the agenda for gathering the religions of the world in a new significant dialogical dialogue (Cousins). In addition to the task the world’s religions have of coming to know and respect one another, this threefold agenda would bring urgency and relevance to the interfaith efforts by focusing their energies on these issues of common human threat and opportunity.

But the learning must go both ways.

Absent from these papers is any discussion of the differing epistemologies of religion and science. Religion’s way of knowing is through revelation. If wisdom is to come from religious sources to meet the crisis of our

time, as it has in the past, it will not be solely the result of rational processes correlating religion and science but also of prayer, meditation, and reflection on scriptural traditions. One can hope with Katz that science, or enough scientists, will become “comfortable” with religious explanations and that harmony between truth claims can be established, even though they are arrived at by distinctly different pathways.

Difficult as it may be to talk in this context about *sin*, it is the way the Judeo-Christian tradition would see the root cause of much of the distress and the potential evolutionary disaster described in these papers. This foundational biblical premise has been so trivialized in our pseudoreligious secular society that it barely resembles the drastic condition to which this concept points. But if sin is understood as a fundamental separation from self, from others, and from the mystery, depth, and greatness of one’s own being (Paul Tillich’s way to talk about God), then this word *sin* takes on the gravity needed to address the cause of the human crisis. The way to re-union and potential—or at least partial—harmony is by way of repentance, literally turning and going in a different direction, which could be understood as the religious terminology for transformation. In the Christian myth repentance is made possible by grace, the occasional experience in every human life of reunion with self, others, and God in the realization of our own ultimate significance. The clearest expression of grace is in the cross of Christ, a symbol of sacrifice for the sake of the whole creation and all its creatures. It is a sacrifice, once, for all, that invites our sacrifice for one another—and perhaps now, for the sake of the world and the survival of our species as well. Can this myth, along with the myths of other traditions, enter into the “dialogical dialog” (Cousins) and the new “world of partnership” (Loye), not as embarrassing antiquities that need to be accommodated but as ways of knowing and transforming that can contribute to the urgent task of “restructuring humanity”?

BROAD-BASED ORGANIZATIONAL EFFORT

The question I ponder as I complete this response is: How can plans, processes, and procedures be developed that are big enough, comprehensive enough, and global enough to match the dimensions of the critical challenges raised in these papers?

It is impressive to me that while each of these authors presents facts, findings, and opinions that point to a cataclysmic future for the human species, these articles are written in a spirit of optimism and hope.

Katz, early in his paper, after listing the “massive trends” that mark our condition, from ozone depletion to the precarious nature of agricultural production, says it is “extraordinarily unlikely that we will survive these massive trends without global environmental catastrophes, terrible conflict and warfare over increasingly scarce resources” (p. 239). Still, by the

end of his paper, he counsels that we need not be demoralized by the massive challenges that face us. "The times in which we live offer a historic opportunity to engage the entire world in redressing the imbalances that exist in the environment . . ." (p. 253).

Cousins echoes the same point when he speaks of the high stakes: "the very survival of life on our planet—either chaos and destruction or creative transformation and the birth of a new consciousness." But he also speaks of "forces . . . in our day . . . [that have] the power to draw the human race into a global network and the religions of the world into a global spiritual community" (p. 210).

Throughout his paper Loye speaks of the current time as "the most critical juncture in the evolution of our species" (p. 223), yet his concern is to initiate thinking about a global ethic that is based on a theory of "how we can tap into and align ourselves with what appears to be an evolutionary inbuilt healing force" (pp. 223–24).

I would hazard stating the consensus of these papers, or, more modestly, a theme central to each of them, in the following way: Religion and spiritual leadership, informed by and in consort with progressive science, are the principal forces in society capable of leading the way to a global morality that transcends culture, race, ethnicity, politics, and religious pluralism.

If this statement captures at least a significant portion of the content of these provocative articles and if this summary statement is accepted, there is an urgent need to focus human and financial resources on a global organizational strategy.

Impressive efforts are already underway. Loye quotes from a document titled, "Toward a Global Ethic," a product of the centennial observation of the Parliament of the World's Religions, convened in Chicago in 1993 in commemoration of the first parliament gathering at the Colombian Exposition held in 1893. Approximately seven thousand religious leaders were in attendance at each event. The Parliament is now a permanent organization with plans to hold a global gathering twice every decade. The next meeting of the Parliament is scheduled to take place in South Africa in December 1999.

There are other groups as well. Loye mentions the Union of Concerned Scientists. On the West Coast, Bishop William Swing of the Episcopal Diocese of San Francisco has inspired the formation of the United Religions Initiative, which has gathered religious leaders from around the world in mutual dialogue and is planning a series of events on various continents in the years ahead.

An intentional strategy needs to be carefully developed to make the issues described in these articles and in this response a key part of the agenda of these emerging organizations. In the opinion of this responder, these organizations provide receptive places for progressive, prophetic science to

engage religious leaders and to draw them into the transformational task that is now required of the human species. These groups should be strongly urged (1) to press on with the task of developing a global ethic based on the substantial beginning made in Chicago in 1993; (2) to develop global strategies to carry the discussion of the global ethic into the leadership councils of the various faith traditions; (3) to build strong partnership bonds with all other interfaith groups; and (4) to draw progressive scientists into the executive structures of their organizations.

Many other organizational efforts should be pursued as well. Here are a few initial steps that need to be taken:

1. Science-and-religion, already a recognized discussion at the American Association of Religion (AAR), needs to be highlighted in this academic religious forum as *the* issue, not one among many, that requires the wisdom of the best American theological minds.
2. A plan should be made to devote a biennial meeting of the Association of Theological Schools (a gathering of deans and presidents of North America's Protestant and Roman Catholic seminaries and divinity schools) to the topic of science-and-religion and the transformational requirement. A sustained emphasis in the associations would be a major way to influence leadership in these religious bodies. Similar strategies need to be developed to influence the preparation of leaders in other faith groups.
3. Individual scientists who have religious connections and religious leaders who are a part of the religion-science movement need to lay intentional plans to permeate their religious organizations with the new consciousness.
4. Programs in scientific organizations should be encouraged and challenged with the agenda articulated here. The most notable such effort at present is the American Association for the Advancement of Science's Program of Dialogue between Science and Religion.
5. Professors in various religious disciplines—especially those who teach doctrine, liturgy, and religious education—need to form teams with scientists and begin the long and creative task of making the new consciousness a part of religious formation and ritual observance.

A strategy for a global summit of religious leaders must be developed. Moral transformation needs to proceed on every level: individual, family, neighborhood, congregation, community, state, and nation. The role of symbolic moral leadership, however, cannot be overlooked or underestimated. The pope, the dalai lama, and leading rabbis, imams, monks, and priests of the world's religions need to convene, perhaps in a coalition of international interfaith groups. These symbolic religious leaders of the world need to stand together at some point in the future and announce to the inhabitants of the earth, in the most dramatic and inclusive way

possible, that ethical change and the development of a new spiritual global consciousness is the moral agenda for the human race (and for all the faith traditions) in the twenty-first century. Such an announcement needs to be followed by each religious leader spelling out what this means in terms of his or her own religious tradition.

It is time for the prophets and the pioneers to become the planners and the organizers of a new global consciousness.

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