

Gandhian Values, A Global Ethic,
and Global Governance

by

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Introduction

We live today at a rare moment in human history, during which we have a unique opportunity to play a creative role in shaping the future of the world. We live in a small, interdependent world -- a global village, as it is popularly called. Robert Muller aptly says, "The world is becoming so interdependent, it is like one body. We have a nervous system which is very advanced. We have a global brain. Now we need a global heart and a global soul." I would add that we also need a global conscience, based on a global ethic.

About 2000 to 2500 years ago, we passed through a similar "transformative" period. That was the first "axis period," in the words of Arnold Toynbee, with the extraordinary emergence of moral and spiritual geniuses in different parts of the world. Buddha and Mahavir arose in India, Lao-Tzu and Confucius in China, Christ in Israel. Earlier, Moses arose in Israel, and Zoroaster in Persia; later, the prophet Mohammed in Arabia. Thus various religions came into existence: Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Islam. These religions proclaimed moral and ethical values.

In India, the Vedas and Upanishads, Bhagavad-Gita and Thirukkural proclaimed new values and principles. Hinduism, the major religion, is unlike other religions in the sense that it was not founded by a particular prophet. Rather it was a galaxy of saints and sages who proclaimed the supremacy of the Spirit. They discovered the Ultimate Reality and said, "Ekam sat" (truth is one); "Vipra bahuda vadanti" (sages call it by several names).

Later, India saw the emergence of another religion, Sikhism, and also welcomed the religions that originated outside. Zoroastrianism came to India when a group of Parsis who were persecuted in Persia

landed on the Gujarat coast in western India. The leader of the group met the king of the region and sought asylum. The king gave them permission and granted land to settle down. The Parsi leader thanked the king. Then he brought a large vessel full of milk and put some sugar in it. He said "Sir, we will be like the sugar in the milk." Even to this day the Parsi community, small in size, is a precious part of Indian society. Thus, India became a hospitable home for all the religions of the world, twelve in number, including the Baha'i faith.

International visitors to India are always struck by the pervasive role that religion plays in personal, family and social life. Vincent Sheean, a student of human societies, has remarked that in no other society has the "transcendental" permeated social life as it has in India. Swami Vivekananda, a well-known modern Hindu saint, said that every nation had a special genius, and in the case of India it is religion. Indeed, religion is India's life-breath.

Gandhian Values

Therefore, it is not surprising that in the 20th century India produced a personality like Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948). He was a profoundly religious person who appealed to the spiritual susceptibilities of the Indian people and mobilized them for the freedom struggle which was a unique event in human history. India won political independence through nonviolent methods and processes.

To understand Mahatma Gandhi, we must go to his religious roots. In his autobiography he describes the beginnings of his religious consciousness. He learned religion from his nurse, Ramba; from his 6th to his 16th year, at school, he was taught "all sorts of things except religion." Gandhiji also tells how the reading of the Ramayana, India's famous epic, made a deep impression on him. A significant aspect of his early religious experience was the fact that his father was visited by many friends from other religions. Jain monks, Muslims, and Parsi friends came to his home, and Gandhiji developed, even in his childhood, "a toleration of all faiths."

Gandhiji says, "One thing took deep root in me: the conviction that morality is the basis of things, and that truth is the substance of all morality; and truth became my sole objective." He also says that a Gujarati poem made a powerful impression on his mind and heart:

For a bowl of water give a goodly meal;
For a kindly greeting bow thou down with zeal;
For a simple penny pay thou back with gold;
If thy life be rescued, life do not withhold.
Thus the words and actions of the wise regard;
Every little service tenfold they reward.
But the truly noble know all men as one,
And return with gladness good for evil done.

This poem contains the precept, "return good for evil." It is, in other words, ahimsa, nonviolence at its best. We see how truth and nonviolence, satya and ahimsa, thus became the two guiding principles or values for Mahatma Gandhi, even from his childhood.

In the chapter in his autobiography entitled "Religious Ferment," Gandhiji refers to his intimate interactions with Christian friends. He also says that he had already started following his "inner voice." Later, he mentions how Tolstoy's book "The Kingdom of God is Within You" overwhelmed him and left an indelible impression on him. When he started an ashram in South Africa, he named it "Tolstoy Farm." Gandhiji further says that he had accepted "the religion of service." He felt that "God could be realized only through service." He also made introspection a habit.

Gandhiji made a historic contribution to the evolution of human society when he applied nonviolence to social issues. He says, "We have to make truth and nonviolence not matters for mere individual practice, but for practice by groups and communities and nations. That, at any rate, is my dream. I shall live and die in trying to realize it."

The Gandhian Movement in South Africa thus developed a new methodology of social action which Gandhiji called satyagraha. This word was coined by him to distinguish it from "civil disobedience" and "passive resistance." This methodology of nonviolent action was different and new, a creative and original contribution, causing perceptive people around the world to take note. When satyagraha became successful in South Africa, word spread around the world. On his return to India, Gandhiji used the same method of satyagraha in successfully resolving regional and local issues. Eventually the entire country became his laboratory and the method of nonviolent action was experimented with on a truly large scale. India won independence in an unprecedented manner, and the practicality of nonviolence was demonstrated.

Gandhiji listed seven social sins:

1. Politics without principles;
2. commerce without morality;
3. wealth without work;
4. education without character;
5. science without humanity;
6. pleasure without conscience;
7. worship without sacrifice.

Thus he emphasized the place of ethics in every sector of social life. Further, Gandhiji envisioned a world where national interest would be subordinate to global interest: "Just as the cult of patriotism teaches us today that the individual has to die for the family, the family has to die for the village, the village for the district, the district for the province and the province for the country, even so, a country has to be free in order that it may die, if necessary, for the benefit of the world."

The contribution of the Gandhian movement to the 20th century was the value of "active nonviolence" to solve political and social issues. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the United States stated that while he got his basic principles from Jesus Christ, he obtained the operational methods from Mahatma Gandhi. His nonviolent movement for civil rights produced positive results. The methods followed by Nelson Mandela in South Africa were not entirely nonviolent, but his preference was always for nonviolence. His long tenure in prison and his positive outlook, "free from bitterness," made him a universally respected leader. He, too, was successful when apartheid finally ended: another demonstration of the power of nonviolence. Thus Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela have made creative contributions towards the formulation of a global ethic. Nonviolence, as a moral value and practical method of problem-solving, can be a constituent part of the emerging global ethic.

A Global Ethic

A common core of ethical values is found in all religious traditions. This is an important requirement for building a new global order. There can be no global order without a global ethic.

When the centenary of the Parliament of Religions was held in Chicago in 1993, the focus was on developing a global ethic. One hundred years before, in 1893, leaders of various religious traditions had met on a common platform for the first time in human history. Speaking on that historic occasion, Swami Vivekananda declared, "The bell tolling to open the Congress will be the death-knell of all fanaticisms." The Chairman of the 1893 Parliament of Religions, Dr. Barrows, said "Oh, wise men of the East and the West, this Congress may be the morning star of the 20th century." At the end of the Congress, he said, "Henceforth the religions of the world will make war, not on one another, but on the giant evils that afflict mankind."

At the Centenary Assembly, which I had the privilege to attend on behalf of the World Conference on Religion and Peace, a nucleus of about 200 religious and spiritual leaders held a special meeting to consider the declaration of a global ethic. While there was a broad consensus on the contents of the declaration, we had the feeling that there was room for further refinement. So the conference decided to add the word "towards." At the final open session of the Assembly, the declaration was issued with the title "Towards a Declaration of a Global Ethic."

The main elements of the newly declared global ethic are:

Interdependence and respect for all life;

mutual respect and tolerance;

a culture of solidarity;

humankind as one family;

a culture of nonviolence;

peace with justice;

equal partnership between men and women;

a just social and economic order;

self-discipline and positive thinking.

Social peace must be built on the foundation of inner peace, what Dr. Patricia Mische has called "inner governance," which is emphasized by all religious traditions.

The Chicago Declaration describes the present scenario and spells out the principles underlying the global ethic. Let me quote some excerpts.

"Our world is experiencing a fundamental crisis; a crisis in global economy, global ecology and global politics. The lack of a grand vision, the tangle of unresolved problems, political paralysis, mediocre political leadership with little insight or foresight, and in general too little sense for the common weal are seen everywhere.

"Hundreds of millions of human beings on our planet increasingly suffer from unemployment, poverty, hunger and destruction of their families. Hope for a lasting peace among nations slips away from us. There are tensions between the sexes and generations. Children die, kill and are killed. More and more countries are shaken by corruption in politics and business.

"It is increasingly difficult to live together peacefully in our cities because of social, racial and ethnic conflicts, the abuse of drugs, organized crime, and even anarchy.

"Our planet continues to be ruthlessly plundered. A collapse of the ecosystem threatens us.

"We condemn these blights and declare that they need not be. An ethic already exists within the religious teachings of the world which counter the global distress. Of course, this ethic provides no direct solution for all the immense problems of the world; but it does supply the moral foundation for a better individual and global order -- a vision which can lead women and men away from despair, and society away from chaos.

"We confirm that there is already a consensus among the religions which can be the basis for a global ethic -- a minimal fundamental consensus concerning binding values, irrevocable standards and fundamental moral attitudes."

The Chicago Declaration further states that there can be no new global order without a new global ethic. It demands that every human being must be treated humanely. Later it lists four basic commitments.

1. Commitment to a culture of nonviolence and respect for life. In the great ancient religious and ethical traditions of humankind we find the directive: You shall not kill. Or in positive terms: Have respect for life!

2. Commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order. In the great ancient religious and ethical traditions of humankind we find the directive: You shall not steal. Or in positive terms: Deal honestly and fairly!

3. Commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness. In the great ancient religious and ethical traditions of humankind we find the directive: You shall not lie. Or in positive terms: Speak and act truthfully!

4. Commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women. In the great ancient religious and ethical traditions of humankind we find the directive: You shall not commit sexual immorality. Or in positive terms: Respect and love one another!

Finally, the Chicago Declaration stresses the importance of a transformation of human consciousness. What is required is that human beings around the world should change their mental attitudes. There should be a radical change in the collective consciousness of humankind. And this can be done by all working together. Particularly the vast networks of religious institutions, which have pervasive influence upon millions of people, could change their mindset. The Chicago Declaration calls all the religious communities around the world to do this.

The Declaration ends thus :

"We pledge to work for such transformation in individual and collective consciousness, for the awakening of our spiritual powers through reflection, prayer, meditation, or positive thinking, for a conversion of the heart.

"Together we can move mountains. We commit ourselves to a common global ethic, to better mutual understanding, as well as to socially beneficial, peace-fostering, and Earth-friendly ways of life.

"We invite all men and women, whether religious or not, to do the same."

One of the useful suggestions made at Chicago for follow-up action was that the various professions, such as physicians, scientists, businesspeople, journalists, and politicians, could formulate "up-to-date codes of ethics which would provide specific guidelines for the vexing problems of these particular professions."

On March 22 to 24, 1996, the InterAction Council convened a seminar of a high-level Expert Group on the theme, "In Search of Global Ethical Standards." The consultation was chaired by the former Chancellor of Germany, Helmut Schmidt. I was one of the participants. After three days of intensive and in-depth deliberations, the Expert Group came out with the following important recommendations and suggestions:

the compiling of a common code of ethics which could then be put into booklet form and disseminated across the globe;

in addition to this general code of ethics, specific codes of ethics should be promoted for the professions, business, political parties, mass media, and other critical interests. Such codes of ethics will contribute to self-regulation;

suggestions to the world's leaders that in 1998, the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations should convene a conference to consider a Declaration of Human Obligations to complement the earlier crucial work on rights;

development of a global educational curriculum that would include the best contributions of the world's religions and philosophies. Such a curriculum should be available to every educational institution and accessible through the most current communication technologies -- radio, educational television, videos, the Internet, etc.;

to broaden understanding and combine the intellectual resources necessary for the development of such a curriculum, the United Nations should consider establishing as part of the UN University system a World Interfaith Academy that would bring together scholars, students and leaders of the world's faiths.

Further, the Vienna Expert Group said:

"There have been landmark advances to strengthen human rights in international law and justice, beginning with the United Nations' adopting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Social, Cultural and Economic Rights, and the Covenants of Civil and Political Rights and Social, Cultural and Economic Rights, elaborated by the Vienna Declaration on Human Rights and Program for Action. What the UN proclaimed on the level of rights, the Chicago Declaration confirmed and deepened from the perspective of obligations."

The Expert Group also said:

"We note the ongoing participatory process, initiated by the Earth Council and Green Cross International, to develop an Earth Charter. We welcome this initiative as an example of an effort to involve the world's religions and other groups in defining the basic change in values, behavior, and attitudes of government, private sector, and civil society, needed for a shift to sustainable development."

Global Governance

What kind of global governance system do we visualize? I for one do not visualize a centralized world government. In the past there have been references to "world government," and those who spoke about world government meant in a vague way that there should be a world authority. But we have to be clear as to what exactly we mean by global governance.

When we talk about world government, we have the image of the national government in our minds. National governments as they are constituted today are powerful institutions, armed with military power, police force, and bureaucratic machines. The nation-state has to change. In the new world order that we visualize, nation-states should become softer, more responsive, less powerful, and less oppressive. As a matter of fact, there should be a two-way movement of the powers of the nation-state, to be transferred to local governments on the one hand, and to the global governance system on the other.

A global governance system will include multilateral and multilevel structures of decision-making bodies. The new world will consist of vast networks of local communities in which participatory democracy flourishes. So the first principle I would advocate is the principle of decentralized polity. Around the

world today, local communities are in varying stages of empowerment. In some societies they are quite strong and vital. In tribal and hill societies, the "village council" is a powerful body even today. In modern democracies like the United States, local bodies are strong.

In countries like India, historically speaking, the village councils and local bodies lost their original strength during colonial rule. Even after the advent of independence, in 1947, as per its new Constitution India had only two tiers of governance: national government and state government. There was a list of subjects for the national government, a concurrent list of subjects shared by the central government and the state governments, and a third list of subjects which were the exclusive jurisdiction of the state governments.

But this was not what Gandhiji had visualized for independent India. He visualized a vast commonwealth of powerful local communities. He even went to the extent of saying that each village should be a "republic." Now India has amended its Constitution; the 73rd Constitutional Amendment on Panchayati Raj is certainly a mighty step towards a decentralized polity where power resides with the people. We have now a participatory democracy.

The grand vision of Mahatma Gandhi is given below:

"In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever-widening, never-ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. It will be an oceanic circle whose center will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the village ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are an integral part."

Today we have hundreds of thousands of locally elected leaders participating in the governance process. What is more, under the new system of Panchayats, women have come to the forefront and are members and presidents in one-third of the local bodies. Similarly, there is a constitutional provision for the weaker sections of Indian society to be represented in the governance system, according to their proportion of the population. Thus social justice and gender justice have been incorporated constitutionally into the decentralized governance system now prevailing in India.

Democratic Decentralization. I would suggest that all over the world the movement should be towards democratic decentralization and participatory democracy. People at the grass roots must have the power to shape their own destiny. It is becoming increasingly clear that the basic problems of humankind such as population, primary health, primary education, and food security can be solved only by the constructive efforts of people in local communities; national governments can play an important enabling role. Thus, in the future world order, we visualize at the basic tier a powerful local democracy. Then we move on to national democracy, and then to global democracy.

Global Democracy. I agree with Dr. Johan Galtung that the future global system should be based upon global democracy. The present situation in the world is far from democratic. In some countries, democracy does not prevail; in some it is limited. How to democratize the future world system is the

challenge before us. One of the basic reforms that we shall demand of the United Nations is that it should become more democratic; how to democratize the UN system is a matter requiring serious thought.

UN as Basis of Global System. This brings me to a second basic proposition, namely that the future global governance system should grow out of the present United Nations system. With all its strengths and weaknesses, the UN system has come to stay. From 1945 to 1997, it has grown from strength to strength. It is true that during the "cold war" decades the United Nations could not play its due role; but after the cold war's end, it can play a new role. The two basic documents brought about by the former Secretary-General, Mr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, namely the Agenda for Peace and the Agenda for Development, give guidelines for the UN's future role. The Commission on Global Governance has come out with good suggestions for the restructuring of the United Nations: for instance, the Security Council should be made more broad-based, and its veto power should be abolished. Further, the UN General Assembly alone is not enough; it is only an assembly of official delegates of the national governments.

People's Assembly or World Parliament. What we should have is a People's Assembly where representatives of the peoples of the world will gather and voice their views about the future of the world. In a way this parliament of the world will be similar to the legislative bodies of various nations.

Restructuring the UN. The Commission on Global Governance has made several suggestions regarding UN restructuring. Some of them are:

1. The Trusteeship Council should be given a new mandate to exercise trusteeship over the global commons;
2. the UN specialized agencies should develop as centers of authority in their fields;
3. the International Court of Justice must be made stronger and all members of the UN should accept its compulsory jurisdiction;
4. an International Criminal Court should be established in order to enforce international law;
5. an appropriate body should be asked to explore new ways in which international lawmaking can be accepted.

Economic Governance. Following are some of the Commission's suggestions:

1. An Economic Security Council should be established within the United Nations;
2. all governments should enact legislation to implement the Uruguay Round agreement to set up the World Trade Organization;
3. the role of the International Monetary Fund should be further enhanced;

4. governments should re-deploy their efforts to meet the target of 0.7 percent of Gross Domestic Product for official development assistance.

In the course of several recent years, the United Nations has succeeded in developing a system of global law regarding Antarctica and the Law of the Sea. Taking advantage of these past successes, the UN should be encouraged to move into other areas of global law.

Common Security System. Since the world is moving towards a common global security system, radical changes could be brought about to improve the present position. The Charter of the United Nations should be revised to allow the Security Council to act in situations within countries; and the UN should continue to work for a nuclear weapon-free world and to ban nuclear testing and weapons production.

Demilitarization. Demilitarization should be given increased priority in the new global order. National governments should be encouraged to adopt lower levels of global defense spending. States should undertake to bring about a convention on the curtailment of the arms trade. There should be a worldwide ban on the manufacture and export of land mines. A demilitarization fund should be established to help developing countries reduce their military expenditure. Indeed, taking a long-term view of the future of the world, the enormous resources which are now spent on armaments and standing armies should be diverted to peaceful-purposes through mutual understanding between nations, and there should be reciprocally accepted decisions of low spending on defense.

Free and Open National Borders. A free and open border between India and Nepal, for instance, and between the United States and Canada, are examples of how national borders can be free and friendly without armies facing one another. The example of Costa Rica, where a country (albeit a small one) has no armed forces at all and depends only on the goodwill and friendship of its neighbors, is a principle that should be accepted more and more around the world.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to describe the current global context; the Indian context in particular; the emergence of the Gandhian movement and Gandhian values; their contribution to a global ethic; the Centenary of the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago, and its proclamation of a global ethic; the need for a global ethic to form the basis for a good global order; the progress made towards a global order; and the UN System and the need for further advances towards a proper global system. This paper is in the nature of an exploration and must be taken as a tentative document. Along with other papers being presented by friends and colleagues from around the world and from different religious and national backgrounds, it will constitute a joint quest.