

Religion and World Order 1994 Symposium

Religion and World Order

Introduction and Overview

by

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It is now commonplace to speak of a new world order. But there is not yet a shared vision of what that new world order should be. We live in a transformative moment, but how deep will that transformation go? The breakdown of the old world order, based on superpower bipolarities and systems of dominance, are there for all to see, but the task of shaping a new world order has yet to be undertaken as a serious work. It beckons to us on the road ahead as a challenge and opportunity to create the not yet but possible future.

Thus, the question now before us is not whether there will be a new world order, but what kind of world order? Based on what values? With what underlying vision and spirit? Guided by what kind of ethical principles and policies? By what systems and structures? Who will shape this new world order? For whose benefit? Will the 21st century see a repeat of the violence, genocides and ecocides of the 20th? Or will we who live on the cusp between two centuries use the openness of this historical moment to develop a more humane, just, peaceful, and ecologically sustainable world order; a world order that benefits not only the few, but all of us -- those living now and also those yet to come who will inherit the world we create?

These are some of the questions being addressed in Project Global 2000 (PG2000), a partnership of 4 UN agencies and 16 nongovernmental organizations who are collaborating to expand public discourse and action for more humane global systems. People from different walks of life who want to participate in this process can do so through the project's six program councils: Business, Communications, Education, Health, Youth, and Religion.

The Religion Council of PG2000 is sponsoring a series of initiatives to the year 2000 that involve people from the major world religious and spiritual traditions in reflection and action for a more just, peaceful, and ecologically responsible world order. Working groups from each of the major traditions are producing reflection-action documents on the contribution their spiritual tradition, scriptures, teachings, and networks can make to the development of a global ethic and systems that can respond effectively to the global crises and opportunities of today's interdependent world. These documents will be used for reflection and action by the members and networks of the respective religions and spiritual communities, and also in multi-religious discourse and action for a more just world order.

The present work is the edited transcript of one of the multi-religious dialogues sponsored by the PG2000 Religion Council. It was held on February 4, 1994, in conjunction with the Third Global Structures Conference in Washington DC, (February 3-6, 1994). Panel members from seven different religious traditions were asked to animate discussion with brief opening reflections on core questions being addressed in the Religion and World Order initiative (see below), with special reference to touchstones and contributions from their own traditions to the development of ethical principles for humane global systems for peace and conflict resolution, economic well-being, human rights, ecological balance, and cultural integrity. These opening remarks were followed by interaction among the panelists and 50 other participants. This report includes the panelists opening remarks and a discussion of the larger group interaction. An abstract or summary report of the proceedings is included in the Appendix, along with a list of the participants.

The Need

The approaching 50th anniversary of the United Nations, to be celebrated in 1995, provides a special framework and point of reference for exploring the kind of world structures needed for the next century. When the UN charter was drafted and signed in 1945, the world faced a particular set of problems and challenges. Now, 50 years later, there is a new nexus of military, economic, environmental, population, human rights, and health problems that were not anticipated at the time. These problems can only be dealt with through new levels of global cooperation and strengthened global systems.

Existing international institutions were shaped in the shadow of World War II and the Cold War that followed. While the war was still on, Allied powers began planning for a new world order and institutions focused on two main concerns: (1) the prevention of future wars, and (2) the reconstruction of war-devastated economies and international monetary relationships. The United Nations was designed to address the first; the World Bank and International Monetary Fund the second.

When the United Nations Charter was signed in June 1945, the drafters were not yet aware of work on an atomic bomb. They did not anticipate the nuclear arms race or threat of nuclear proliferation. Nor did they anticipate the cold war and how it would obstruct the UN's effectiveness.

Instead of that new world order based on collective security that they envisaged, what emerged was a bipolar world order driven by the arms race and economic and ideological conflict between the superpowers. The major powers viewed all their international relations through this framework. An entire generation of national and international policy-makers was trained to think and act within this framework;

ill-prepared for leadership in the face of the the new economic and environmental threats that have emerged since then.

Also in 1945, much of the world was still colonized, with great numbers of the world's peoples under foreign domination and not represented or consulted in the San Francisco negotiations. Only 51 nation-states determined the principles and structures that framed the new global organization. In the decades that followed, self-determination and democratization movements spread worldwide, and more than 100 new nation-states came into existence, joining and seeking equal representation and decision-making power in international institutions and forums.

Environmental concerns were also not on many peoples' minds in 1945. None of the drafters of the UN Charter or of the subsequent Universal Declaration on Human Rights foresaw threats to the Earth's air, water, soil, rainforests, and plant and animal species on the scale we do today. They never imagined that human activities would one day produce a hole in the Earth's protective ozone layer, or global warming, or that the transboundary shipment of toxic and radioactive wastes would become a bone of international contention. Nor did they consider the need to protect the rights of future generations to a healthy environment.

Furthermore, when the Charter was drafted the underlying assumption was that states were the only legitimate actors. "We the peoples" were the first words in the UN Charter, but in fact, the "peoples" were not given a real vote or voice. Everyone knew the real players in international relations were to be nation-states. Neither the people, nor the newly created world body itself had any real power or authority to act effectively.

The centrality and sovereignty of the nation-state was enshrined in the new Charter and in subsequent international agreements. Ironically, because states did not delegate or pool some of their sovereignty in the world body to make it truly effective, they left it too weak to effectively protect their own sovereignties against acts of aggression.

The founding states also did not make the world body truly democratic. Some states were made more equal than others (e.g. in the voting structure of the Security Council). There were restrictions in horizontal democracy among the sovereign states. And democratic participation from below, from the peoples, was not provided for, except through the member states which may or may not have provided democratic space for their peoples voices.

In the last few years this state-centric system has been challenged from both above and below. From above, the forces of globalization are making state sovereignty increasingly irrelevant. From below, people's movements and nongovernmental organizations, often acting in solidarity across state borders, are pushing for a greater voice and role in shaping the global structures and policies that affect their lives. There is a growing global civic literacy and sense of global citizenship. This new global literacy brings with it demands for the democratization of global institutions; demands that "we the peoples" have a greater role in global governance.

Many heads of states now recognize that national sovereignty is largely an illusion. Global environmental threats and economic forces pay little attention to national borders or sovereign banners. If there is to be an adequate response to these transboundary threats, some sovereignty must be delegated to global level institutions to make them more effective. The question is not one of totally abandoning the principle of state sovereignty. Rather, it is one of determining how much sovereignty to invest at local, national and global levels of governance, and for which purposes. There is a need for effective systems of participatory governance at all the appropriate levels where decisions have to be taken -- local, national, and global.

Our generation lives in a rare moment of history, a transformative moment. The end of the cold war, the emergence of global communications systems, the continuing pressure for democratization in all levels -- from local and national to global structures -- are all signs of a historic window of opportunity. This is a very open and malleable period in history. Old systems are breaking down and new ones are in process of being created. But this malleability will not last forever. There is a very narrow margin of time to make a difference in the shape of these new systems and structures. Decisions being made now will affect the norms, policies, and systems that govern the world far into the 21st century. Once institutionalized they will become far less malleable and receptive to change.

The Important Role of Religious Networks

Cultures and human institutions are shaped not only by political and economic forces, but even more profoundly by religious and spiritual forces. The teachings of Lao Tzu, Confucius, Buddha, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Paul, and Mohammed, for example, have molded human life and thought patterns much more than have political revolutions and revolutionaries. Religious groups, whether Muslim, Christian, Jew, Buddhist, or Hindu include members from different races, nationalities, and ethnic backgrounds. They are global communities in microcosm, with shared values, beliefs, and social agendas that transcend national loyalties.

Of course, this does not mean that religion always plays a positive role in human interactions. The very features of religion that contribute to a sense of belonging for some may cause others to feel excluded. Religious differences have often turned into divisiveness, self-righteousness, and fanaticism, leading to conflict, hostilities, and sometimes brutality, atrocities, and war. Organized religion has also sometimes been a tool of the state, used to manipulate people's loyalties and maintain blind obedience and unquestioning allegiance to state power. or it has sometimes made itself indistinguishable from the state, wielding political power for its own gains. And one does not need to be a Marxist to note that religion has sometimes been an opiate that numbed people into acceptance of hunger, poverty, and injustice, and thus rendered them impotent to effect change.

But the very fact that organized religion can and sometimes has been such a powerful force in war and conflict also suggests that it can play a powerful role in building and helping to maintain systems of peace, human rights, social justice and ecological balance. Just as there is ample evidence of human

destructiveness being perpetrated in the name of religion, so is there evidence of religion and spirituality inspiring creative solutions and energizing new directions in history. In his explorations of the rise and fall of great civilizations, the historian Arnold Toynbee found that spirituality and religion played a significant role in bridging the time/space between the fall of one civilization and the rise of another. The "creative minorities" that helped build new civilizations from the ashes of the old were often motivated by a strong spiritual vision. In contrast, civilizations that lost their spiritual core were not long sustained.

If we accept Toynbee's conclusions about the importance of spirituality and religion in the rise and fall of civilizations, then we are led to certain conclusions about the importance of spirituality in the development of any truly new world order or global civilization of our time. Inner spiritual growth and transformation may be as, or even more, important than external political changes in global systems. Put another way, inner, spiritual growth, and the development of more democratic, effective, and humane global systems, may be inseparable parts of a holistic world order. They develop in conformity to one another and are mutually reinforcing. The nurturing of a deeper, global consciousness, and the harnessing of spiritual and moral energies for a more just and humane world order, are vital aspects of its healthy development.

The destructive behavior of some people in the name of religion needs to be distinguished from the authentic spiritual or religious impulse. The Latin word *religare*, from which the word for religion in many Western languages is derived, means "harmony," "to unify," "bind together," "make whole." In Eastern languages the words for religion have the same or similar meanings. In Sanskrit, for example, one of the original meanings for *dharma* (eternal religion) is "to bind together the whole universe."

Despite some major variations between different religions and religious experience in different historical periods and societies (e.g., belief in gods or a God is not common to all religions), there are some important similarities or commonly shared aspects of religious experience. Spirituality and religion usually include a sense of the numinous or transcendent. They have evolved from a sense that reality is greater than self or the sum total of measurable physical, economic, political, or other phenomena. Religion and spirituality have been defined as our unitive experience -- i.e., the experience of "the holey" or "whole," or of the "ultimate," "sacred," and "unknowable." It has also been defined as the human effort to discover some order (cosmos) in disorder (chaos).

Some have described religion as a means by which societies interpret life and develop and reinforce codes of morality and conduct in keeping with those interpretations and the requirements of community life. It has also been described as those beliefs and practices by means of which a group designates and seeks to deal with its deepest problems of meaning, suffering, and injustice.

In these understandings of authentic religion and spirituality, then, world order is not something peripheral or outside the realm of religion, but rather at its deepest core of interest, experience, and concern.

In addition to the meanings, spiritual experience, and moral/ethical considerations religion brings to questions of world order, there is also the power of its networks and institutions. The major world religions have world wide networks of organizations, educational and medical institutions, alumni,

research institutes, local communities, and social- and civic-action projects. They can and often do operate across national boundaries with greater ease than many government actors. They can be major actors in the development of a more peaceful, equitable, and ecologically sustainable world order. They can contribute important scholarship and professional expertise to help resolve some of the grave issues that confront humanity. Their members, programs, and institutions put them in touch with leaders and shapers of public policy. They can be important partners and co-creators in the development of a more humane and just world order.

There is a growing interest by UN agencies, and secular NGOs to collaborate with religious institutions and networks to develop a relevant framework of values and leadership for global systems change. They recognize the valuable contributions that religious networks can play in building a viable future. For example, for some years the UN Environment Programme has sponsored an Environmental Sabbath (or Environmental Holy Days) with the cooperation of world religions and spiritual traditions. UNESCO has sponsored conferences on the Contribution by Religions to the Development of a Culture of Peace. UNICEF and the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) collaborated in promoting the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Since 1971, WCRP has been convening regional and global conferences to enlist religious leaders in cooperative initiatives for peace, and recently undertook an initiative in collaboration with UN officials to explore ethical guidelines for humanitarian intervention. The Global Forum of Parliamentary and Spiritual Leaders sponsors conferences bringing together government and religious leaders to address global issues. And Global Education Associates is working with UNICEF and UNESCO to link religious networks with the worldwide "Education for All" education and development efforts.

The imperative to develop and promote a vision of the sanctity of creation and an ethic of social justice and ecological sustainability was emphasized in the address to the government delegates to the Earth Summit by the Summit's Secretary General, Maurice Strong:

"Changes in behavior and direction must be rooted in our deepest spiritual, moral and ethical values. We must reinstate in our lives the ethic of love and respect for the Earth which traditional peoples have retained as central to their value systems. This must be accompanied by a revitalization of the values common to all of our principal religious and philosophical traditions. Caring, sharing, cooperation with and love of each of each other must no longer be seen as pious ideas, divorced from reality, but rather as the indispensable basis for the new realities on which our survival and well-being must be premised."

The Religion and World Order Program of Project Global 2000 provides a process and context for religious and spiritual communities to reflect on what and how, from their tradition and experience, they can contribute to the values and systemic challenges we face today. It invites religious networks to explore the kind of perspectives and structures needed in today's interdependent world if there is to be peace, economic well-being, environmental security, human rights, and cultural integrity. It urges them to join members of other religions and spiritual traditions -- and with secular non-governmental organizations and United Nations agencies -- to conceptualize and work together on the fundamental elements of a cooperative world order and a global vision that affirms the oneness of the human community and the sacredness of all life.

The symposium proceedings on the following pages are one contribution in this ongoing process. Each panelist was asked to respond to one or more of the following guideline questions of the Religion and World Order Program of Project Global 2000. Their responses, and the ensuing discussion between them and other discussants offer rich insights for this ongoing discourse and action.