

**Hawke Research Institute
Working Paper Series**

No 30

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GLOBAL ETHICS: OUTLINES FOR RESEARCH**

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Magill, South Australia
2005

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SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY, RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND GLOBAL ETHICS: OUTLINES FOR RESEARCH

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Introduction

This paper explores current and potential relationships between religious belief, global ethics and social sustainability. I argue that work towards achieving sustainability (theoretical and active) must begin to take into account that the majority of the world's population are adherents to a religious belief of some kind.¹ All major religions contain ideas about the responsibilities of the individual toward the environment and toward other people, and agendas for achieving sustainability may fruitfully draw on these ideas.

It is not my intention to survey each of the world's religions to look for material that ties in with sustainability discourse, in part because this has been done (see in particular Harvard University Press's *Religions and World Ecology* series, 1997–2004), and also because it is a task of considerable scope and this working paper is intended as a preliminary foray into the field. In this instance it will be instructive to look at the nature of religious belief as a whole (inasmuch as it can be discussed as a unity) and the possible contribution of religion to knowledge about social sustainability. For this reason, I will be examining the arena of 'global' or 'universal' ethics – that is, attempts to standardise and codify commonly held ideas about what constitutes good and moral behaviour into single declarations that suit all participants. There is often a religious basis for universal ethics, meaning that much of the work of finding common ground in the world's religious traditions has already been undertaken, by adherents to those religions.

The notion of universal ethics is not a new phenomenon. It might be said that Max Erhmann (author of the well-known *Desiderata*, formerly thought to have been found on a seventeenth-century church wall) invented the modern incarnation of the idea, as the *Desiderata* is truly pan-religious in tone ('Therefore be at peace

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1 The exact figure is debatable: www.adherents.com rates it at 86 per cent, which is about average. Some portion of this figure is made up of those who nominate themselves as religious in census data but do not practice any real religious observance. However, even if the figure were much lower (50 per cent, for example), the argument for inclusion of religious views in sustainability discourse is still compelling.

with God, whatever you perceive him to be...').² Universal ethics is now a rapidly expanding field of activity; there are now numerous global and local institutes and other organisations whose aim is to develop and promote codes of ethical behaviour that are based on ideas that, if not universally held, are widespread in the global sense. Some proponents of global ethics focus on environmental ethics, others on business ethics, and some on social values; thus, the basic concerns of global ethicists are very much in line with the concerns of those who study triple bottom line sustainability.³

Sustainability discourse began with concern over increasing levels of environmental degradation, but it is now commonly understood that the environment is linked with social and economic factors, and that in order to achieve overall sustainability we must explore the interplay between each of these three aspects of the so-called triple bottom line. This exploration has proved far easier to theorise than to put into practice, and various commentators have noted that the 'social' has a habit of falling off the agenda in sustainability discourse, as there is still no clear picture of how it is to be monitored within a triple bottom line reporting framework (Elkington 1999: 75).

For the purposes of this paper, the definition of social sustainability is: *the discourse of a better society and how it might be achieved*. What constitutes social sustainability (and what does not) has been put forward in more detail in a previous working paper in this series (McKenzie 2004). Here it will be useful to separate 'the social' as an element from environmental notions, in order to examine it more closely. This can be done by examining the way in which the two discourses approach the term 'sustainability'.

In its most literal sense, the term 'sustainability' refers to the extent to which an object, environment or condition can remain unchanged. In much environmental sustainability discourse, it is recognised that, while no natural system can be entirely without change, it is both possible and desirable to minimise destructive change and degradation by limiting the impact of human action on the environment. Unless we limit our own level of environmental destruction, it will significantly compromise the needs of future generations.

Social sustainability discourse approaches the term in an entirely different way: it is not about sustaining a current natural situation, and cannot therefore progress with the intention of limiting human action, because human action is the basis of society. Social sustainability discourse begins with the basic premise that our

2 *Desiderata* text and explanation of authorship at <http://www.fleurdelis.com/desiderata.htm>, accessed June 2005.

3 Global ethics organisations include the Centre for Global Ethics (<http://astro.temple.edu/~dialogue/geth.htm>) and the Institute for Global Ethics (<http://www.gloaethics.org/>).

current social mode of action is flawed, witnessed by large imbalances in the distribution of wealth and power and by the extent of social exclusion. Our notion of social sustainability is currently determined by our perception of its absence; indeed, if we lived in a sustainable society, we would probably have no need for the concept of one.

It is not, therefore, the goal of work toward social sustainability to maintain our current society just as it is, but to alter it so that it may become worth sustaining, and so that it takes on a form that may be sustained. We are immediately faced with the difficulty of *imagining a positive situation that does not currently exist, in order to attempt to find solutions for current and everyday problems*. Such images of idealised social situations take on many forms: policy documents, utopian images and texts (on which see Robb, forthcoming in this working paper series), religious decrees (one might argue that the Ten Commandments are constructions or models for a perfect society), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and declarations of global ethics such as the one developed by the Parliament of the World's Religions.

I will be analysing the last two documents – the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and *Towards a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration* – and comparing them with a well-developed social sustainability policy framework (the Western Australian Council of Social Services 'Model of Social Sustainability').⁴ The two kinds of document have not been studied in comparison before, and the connection is an important one. By drawing global ethics into the discourse of social sustainability we not only increase our understanding of what a sustainable society may be, but also how our own vision of sustainability links with those of others around the globe.

Basic results of the document comparison are given at the end of this paper. These simply show that there is much in common between religious and ethical notions of a perfect society and the image of a better society found in social sustainability policy frameworks. The major conclusion is not so much that the similarities are present, but that the comparative methodology is viable, and that future work on social sustainability can usefully proceed by drawing in ideas and visions from religious/ethical declarations.

4 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) is online at http://www.universalrights.net/main/decl_fm.htm. *Towards a Global Ethic* is online at the Council for the Parliament of the World's Religions website: http://www.cpwr.org/resource/global_ethic.htm. The *WACOSS Model of Social Sustainability* is online at http://wacoss.org.au/images/assets/SP_Sustainability/HSCIP%20Stage%201%20Report.pdf.

Brief overview of sustainability, sociology and religion

The link between environmental sustainability and religious traditions is well established and there have been significant publications in this area in the last decade, particularly in the US (*Encyclopaedia of religion and nature* 2005; Harvard University Press's Religions and World Ecology series, 1997-2004) and the work of the Religion and Ecology group at the American Academy of Religion. This paper does not attempt to add substantially to that discourse, but it will be useful nonetheless to summarise the field briefly. Broadly speaking, academic work on sustainability and religion can be categorised as follows:

- *Condemnation of religion for promoting environmental damage:*
Scholars such as Merchant (*The death of nature*, 1980) and Shepard (*Nature and madness*, 1982) have attacked organised religion, particularly Christianity, for fostering environmentally destructive attitudes.
- *Green elements in traditional religions:*
Here, religions are 'mined' for their potential contributions to the green movement. Examples include the *Encyclopaedia of religion and nature* already cited. The work of the Harvard Group in particular focused on the need 'to establish a common ground among diverse religious cultures for environmentally sustainable societies' (italics mine). This is comparable with the intentions of the Parliament of the World's Religions in establishing a common code of global ethics. The focus of some such work in this field is on what religions could achieve in this field if they were reformed (Tucker 2003). Indigenous beliefs are often studied in this way (Deloria 1994).
- *Global environmental spiritualism:*
In this category is work that perceives a link between awareness of the global environment and holistic/pan-religious spiritual beliefs. The focus here is on the perception of nature as a deity (Gaia, etc) and on human awareness of the deity as being of ultimate benefit to our environmental attitudes (ie Deudney 1995).
- *Indigenous environmental spiritualism:*
In this category are indigenous or fourth world arguments about the presence within specific indigenous cultures of environmental sustainability knowledge. Such arguments are generally anti-colonial in tone and seek to regain or reapply the knowledge concerning environmental sustainability that was formerly widespread in the culture (eg Wall and Masayeva 2004). These must be distinguished from work by first world authors mining indigenous traditions for 'green' material.
- *Religion in sustainable development:*
Here, work on sustainable development projects throws up evidence of the effect of religious beliefs on development projects. In some cases it is

positive (the embracing of Buddhist values as principles for nature park management in the Himalayas: Garung 1992) and in other cases religious belief is viewed as a possible obstacle or limitation (Wilbur and Jameson 1980).

While the contribution – real and potential – of religious traditions to environmental sustainability is well established, the picture is less clear when we examine religion and social sustainability. A web search (May 2005) on the subject of sustainability and religion yields very little of relevance to the social aspect, and points in most cases to material on environmentalism. Searches on major databases such as Academic ASAP and Science Direct also reveal that the link between social sustainability and spirituality is not well established. As the link is not an altogether unlikely one, the relative lack of material on the topic raises the question of why the topic has not been broached before.

In part, this is a question of terminology: few studies on the sociology of religion make any reference to ‘sustainability’, but nonetheless it is generally understood that religion is a social force capable of either sustaining a society or catalysing change (eg Roberts 1990: 57). More importantly, the lack of material on religion and social sustainability is a product of the problematic relationship between religion and the social sciences in western thought. Until relatively recently, religious sociology has been a field characterised by a defensive (and perhaps symbiotic) relationship between sociologists and religious apologists, both aiming to achieve hegemony over the moral basis for collective human life (Kurst 1995: 6).

It has been argued that sociology and psychology – the scientific and systematic study of collective and individual human action developed and promoted by thinkers such as Comte, Marx, Freud, Durkheim and Weber – were born out of the broad social and political movement away from the arbitrary authority of the church in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and sought as its first objective to replace clerical authority with rational science. Many of the early proponents – Comte, Marx and Engels in particular – predicted that rational social science would replace religion as the dominant way of understanding and governing human action (Kurst 1995: 5-8).

During the 1960s and 70s it must have seemed as though this process of replacement – later dubbed ‘secularisation’ – was near completion. Secularisation, in Hammond’s words, is the idea that ‘society moves from some sacred condition to successively secular conditions in which the sacred evermore recedes’ (1985: 1). Both secular sociologists (Berger 1967; Luckmann 1967; Wilson 1966) and theologians (Cox 1965; MacQuarie 1967) commented on the general decline in the influence of the Christian church in public affairs in terms of this process of secularisation and various models were put forward as to its operations.

As a generalisation, these theories often concern the distinction between religious belief on an individual, communal and societal level. A main proponent of secularisation, sociologist Bryan Wilson, discussed religion as an attribute of ‘community’, that is, local and closely interpersonal social groupings in which commonly held cultural values could be easily transmitted and perpetuated. Wilson argued that the modern era was characterised by a decrease in ‘community’ and an increase in ‘society’ – a social form characterised by large, efficient but essentially impersonal organisations. Religion could not function in ‘society’, as Wilson termed it, anywhere but on the margins, and within people’s individual lives. And thus the eventual demise of religion as a dominant social force was seen as inevitable (Wilson 1982, esp pp 148ff).

While Wilson pointed out that the sociological discussion of secularisation was an ‘explanation of what happened in society’ rather than an endorsement of the process and an attempt to hasten it, it is difficult to ignore the dismissive and peremptory tone towards religious belief in much of *Religion in sociological perspective*. Like many sociologists of the period (and earlier) Wilson argued that, because religion could be scientifically proved to be ‘patently false in its manifest claims’ (1982: 168), the reason for its continued existence in an age of rationality could only be found in its ‘latent functions’ – that is, its ability to create a sense of common values, to legitimate group activity and individual authority, to act as a basis for social cohesion and control (1982: 168–169 and generally).

Wilson’s position may be neatly contrasted with that of theologian John Millbank, who argued in his *Theology and social theory: beyond secular reason* (1990) that modern (Christian) theology had been reduced to pathos and false humility in its attempts to deal with the claims of sociology on rational terms. Millbank proposed that once religion surrendered claims to being an irreducible meta-discourse, it had essentially surrendered its validity. Instead, he argued for the development of a ‘Christian sociology’, in which the suspicions of rational sociology might themselves become the subject of ‘meta-suspicion’ – a mindset that took the religious presence as irreducible truth, and cast doubt ‘on the very idea of there being something “social” ... to which religious behaviour *could be* in any sense referred’ (1990: 102). Taking the views of Wilson and Millbank as exemplary of the extremes of each discourse, it is difficult to imagine a situation of opposition less likely to achieve a fruitful rapprochement. Both writers seek not simply to counter the arguments of the other position, but to dismiss the very basis of the other position to make claims of any truth and substance.

The secularisation debate continues in the twenty-first century, as an extension of the situation just described. Peter Berger, a strong proponent of the theory in the 1960s, has partially retracted his original position and now argues secularity is by no means inevitable, and that in fact European secularity needs to be explained by

sociology precisely because it is a historical and global anomaly (Berger 1999). Others, such as Stark (1999), have pronounced the secularisation theory completely dead, while others (Bruce 2001a, 2001b) still see secularisation at work as a consequence of modernisation. While the sociology of religion is no longer the highly secular field of study it once was, secularisation remains one of its major foci, and a great amount of intellectual energy is still expended arguing its finer points.

One consequence of this is that other discourses of society – in this instance, social sustainability – have not properly engaged with religious belief *because social sustainability is not obviously relevant to secularisation*. Social sustainability as a concept is primarily a child of the social sciences and is most often discussed in social theory texts and social policy frameworks. In most cases where religion is mentioned, it is simply to note that human beings have the right to hold a religious belief without fear of persecution, a notion taken from the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (see below).

I argue that social sustainability – that is, the discourse of a better society and how it might be achieved – does not and should not seek to explain religious belief in sociological terms, but instead to assume that religious belief in many forms is a given in global society, and work toward goals of sustainable social justice with an understanding of religious belief as a potential positive contributor to these aims. (I am not dwelling here on the obvious negative contributions of religious adherents to sustainability or world security, although a detailed research project would doubtless encounter and deal with these. The purpose here is to develop the initial link between sustainability and global ethics.)

Comparative religion in the global spiritual marketplace

One of the most widely known sociological models of religion is that developed by Peter L Berger and generally called 'the sacred canopy'. In *The sacred canopy: elements of a sociological theory of religion*, Berger outlines the thesis that religion is the establishment, through human activity, of an all-embracing sacred order that 'legitimizes social institutions by ... locating them within a sacred frame of reference' (Berger 1967: 33). Berger discusses the process by which such a sacred order (in this case, the Christian order) is constructed, and how it is perpetuated, and how it becomes a part of the internal life world of individuals, arguing for interpersonal and intergenerational transmission of ideas as the most important mechanism for this internalisation:

The reality of the Christian world depends upon the presence of social structures within which this reality is taken for granted and within which successive generations of individuals are socialized in such a way that this world will be real to them. (1967: 45).

The 'sacred canopy' is a useful theory for describing the operations of religion in a culture in which there is one dominant religion. However, more recent sociologists have criticised the model for its inability to account for human behaviour in a multi-religious milieu, and have instead called for a new model, known generally as the 'religious marketplace' (Warner 1993). In this model the person seeking after spiritual experience behaves much as a shop customer, seeking out the religious tradition that best suits personal views about spirituality and morality that have already been received by that individual.

The 'religious marketplace' model highlights an important factor about religion in the globalising world. Access to religious ideas, particularly in western culture, is no longer a process of the reception of received cultural wisdom from earlier generations to the extent that it has formerly been. To borrow Wilson's terminology of 'community' and 'society', religion for citizens of western countries is now often a function of 'society' rather than 'community', as the individual has access to a wide range of opportunities for religious experience, and can also interact with large religious organisations in a highly impersonal way, irrespective of the religious choice of their family and peers.

Western scientific periodisation of history has been traditionally fond of one-way linear structures describing progress from one state to another – industrialisation, modernisation, democratisation and most recently globalisation – and has sometimes faltered when confronted with the renewal of older modes of activity (Hadden and Shupe 1986: ch 1; Hammond 1985: 1–4). Secularisation in western society has not occurred to the extent that was predicted in the 1960s (although it is not possible to cite any widely used sociological model to explain the new phenomenon).

Western society is entering a period of renewed interest in spirituality, including individual forms of spiritual expression as well as in traditional, organised religion (eg Tacey 2003), and this renewal is having a pronounced effect on political and social structures (Berger 1999). Moreover, secularisation was only ever a western (and Soviet/Communist bloc) phenomenon in any event, and it is inappropriate to speak of it in the context of a global society, as many third world nations have witnessed no change in the level of influence of religion as a social force, or have in fact returned to more religious forms of government. In addition, many fourth world/indigenous peoples and nations are seeking to undo the damage of colonialism by recovering or reinstating their religious and cultural traditions as these are perceived as central to their identity and their understanding of nature and society (Wall and Masayeva 2004).

Shupe and Hadden, witnessing the beginning of this resurgence in religious activity and influence and also noting the increasingly global nature of religion, have

argued that ‘finding parallel patterns in the way religion interacts with the social order is a challenge of the first order for the social sciences’ (1998: vii). As I have said, this paper is an attempt to discuss such ‘patterns’ or common elements within the world’s major religious traditions. However if we are to begin to draw out commonalities in religious traditions and look at the potential for the use of these in constructing a basis for social sustainability, some new comparative tools will be required.

Older studies of comparative religion, before the advent of the religious marketplace – for example by Frazer (1911), Eliade (1958) and Campbell (1976) – sought common aspects of myth and ritual in disparate cultures, and explained these similarities either by detailing the spread of ideas from one culture to another, or in terms of archetypal images common to all humans. What these authors did not seek to do was to look within religion for solutions to social, economic or environmental problems.

More recent work presented under the rubric ‘comparative religion’ examines one faith in the light of other belief systems, in order to display the ultimate truth of one faith over the others, or to discredit syncretistic claims supporting the truth of all religions. For instance, an Islamic mission site notes that its comparative religion section aims to investigate *whether or not world religions are complementary and equal*, with a clear intent to persuade readers that they are not.⁵ A Christian site on comparative religion proceeds with an identical purpose: to consider the various world religions as alternative paths to the same transcendental finality. The authors note that ‘this vision is arousing a lot of enthusiasm in many people today’, but urge caution as such syncretistic notions may cause people seeking spiritual fulfilment to become flippant in their choice of belief, as it is ultimately irrelevant to their final salvation: ‘In this case religious syncretism is only a way of misleading the travellers to spiritual disaster.’⁶

The kind of syncretism described here is a consequence of the global religious marketplace, and the return to mainstream Christian values proposed in the site is ultimately a reaction to globalisation. Indeed, it might be argued that the democratisation and commoditisation of religion, rather than secularisation, has been the greatest spur for emergent religious fundamentalism. In any event, the kind of comparative tools on display in these sites are certainly not the ones required for the formulation of a global ethic based on common values in the world’s religious traditions.

Whether the calls for the development of a global ethic have been a direct consequence of globalisation has been debated by some commentators (Küng

5 <http://www.missionislam.com/comprel/index.htm>, accessed June 2005.

6 <http://www.comparativereligion.com/index.html>, accessed June 2005.

2001), but most would agree that the need for global change has been prompted by the realisation that not only do our current problems occur on a global scale, we are all interdependent and shared solutions are going to be required. Thus, some agreement has become necessary on religious and ethical norms, not for the sake of academic interest or theological purity, but because widespread collective action of the kind that is now required needs such norms in order to be sustained.

The development of a full set of tools for the comparative study of religion, global ethics and sustainability policy is too large a subject for this paper. For now, I simply note that the comparison of religious and ethical decrees with policy documents is innovative, potentially generative of knowledge about social sustainability, and also offers a means to introduce social sustainability into mainstream thought, and thus increase its influence on the cultural assumptions that underpin social policy development.

Three main texts for comparative study

This section looks in detail at three main contributions to an emergent ‘global code of ethics’, that is, documents or charters that seek to determine the elements that are so basic to human conceptions of morality and ethics that their presence can be assumed in all cultures, regardless of ethnicity or religion.

1. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its Islamic counterpart

The first major attempt to codify universal ethics for legal and governmental purposes was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which stood alone as the ‘international standard of achievement for all peoples’ and all nations until 1976, when the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) were ratified. The three main documents, and a growing number of subsequent additions, many of which are legally binding treaties, are now collectively known as the Universal Bill of Rights. They are now acknowledged by all United Nations countries – most famously including China, who ratified them in 1998 at the fiftieth anniversary of their creation.

It is difficult to definitively trace the influence of religious belief on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights but it would be unwise to call it an entirely secular document. To begin with, the establishment of the Commission on Human Rights, which was charged with drafting the document, was largely the result of input from church groups into the UN charter (particularly UN charter article 68, which required the creation of a permanent commission on human rights: see Wilson 1996). Secondly, key figures in the creation of the declaration – such as Rene Cassin (Jewish), Charles Habib Malik (Christian) and Arthur Henry Robertson

(Christian) – would doubtless have been guided by their beliefs in the construction of the declaration.⁷

However, it would also be an overstatement to call the declaration a religious expression of universal ethics. The document is often at its most visibly secular when dealing with religion, in the sense that it is pan-religious and aims to support religious belief as a human and social right, and positions itself ‘above’ any individual faith in its ability to make claims about the validity of all faiths. Here are they key passages from the declaration that relate to religion:

Article 2: Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status...

Article 18: Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 19: Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

In article 2, the religious belief of an individual is treated in the same manner as gender, ethnicity or social status: it is a factor that ideally should not affect the right of the individual to fair and equitable treatment, but which in reality has been listed precisely because it frequently is the cause of discrimination. In article 18 it is made clear that religious belief is the natural right of every individual, as is the right to publicly express that belief, and most importantly to change it. The focus throughout is on the rights of individuals, and there is no mention of religious community or society. Further, there is no expression within the document that religious ideas might contribute to human rights; simply that religious expression is a human right.

Conversely, the declaration is at its most religious in tone when religious belief is not at issue, such as the discussion of the inalienable rights of humanity in the preamble:

7 See Sir Ronald Wilson (1996) on the foundation of human rights law.

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.

The declaration proceeds to outline the things to which a human being should not be subjected (slavery, torture, forced association, deprivation of property, and so on), as well the things that a human has a right to receive (education, political representation, access to services, fair legal treatment, family, free association and so on). It is in the second form of 'human right' that the declaration has most in common with policy-directed descriptions of social sustainability found in government publications, such as the WACOSS model of social sustainability, discussed below.

The lack of Islamic input into the declaration and the general labelling of the values of western nations in the UN as 'universal' have drawn the criticism that the document is too fundamentally Judaeo-Christian and that it does not accurately represent the views on human rights of other cultures. The Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights has been one response to this. The Islamic declaration was developed by the World Islamic Council in the early 1980s and is clearly partly modelled on the UN declaration but has an overlay of Islamic values and has had key elements from the UN model removed – notably the right of a Muslim to change his or her beliefs.⁸

The differences between the UN and Islamic Council versions reveal the difficulties faced by those working toward universal ethics. While the Islamic declaration allows for the possibility of other faiths, and notes that their adherents shall not be discriminated against, it also gives primacy to the Islamic faith and argues that Muslims have a right to disobey or ignore any civil law that contradicts the law of the Koran (IV(d)). This is one of many examples of the diminution of the rational, civil, secular world of human law made explicit in the preamble: 'rationality by itself without the light of revelation from God can neither be a sure guide in the affairs of mankind nor provide spiritual nourishment to the human soul, and ... the teachings of Islam represent the quintessence of Divine guidance in its final and perfect form'.

8 The version used is at <http://www.ntpi.org/html/uidhr.html>, accessed May 2005.

The contestation here is really between the source of human rights: the UN declaration views them as essentially human in origin, pertaining to the natural dignity of human beings. Therefore, it is logical and rational that a human organisation could codify such rights and attempt to regulate civil society so that those rights are upheld. According to the Islamic Council, the origin of all human rights is divine, and descriptions of those rights and regulations for upholding them can only come from a divine source.

2. Towards a global ethic: an initial declaration

The second major contribution to universal ethics has come from the Parliament of the World's Religions, a group having perhaps more claim to (rational) universality than either the UN or the Islamic Council. The first ever formal meeting of western and eastern religious leaders occurred at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. They did not create a manifesto, but nonetheless the event is celebrated as the birth of modern inter-religious dialogue. In 1993, the centenary of the event was held in Chicago, the Council for the Parliament of the World's Religions was formed, and the tradition of having a parliament every five years began (subsequent meetings have been in 1999 and last year in 2004). The 1993 parliament drafted *Towards a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration*, which is the centrepiece of the global ethics movement today.

The document (from now on called 'the parliament's declaration') asserts that, while the world is in turmoil, the possibility of sustainable peace and order does exist, and has always existed within a common set of core values found in the teachings of the world's religions, and that these form the basis of a global ethic: 'We affirm that there is an irrevocable, unconditional norm for all areas of life, for families and communities, for races, nations, and religions. There already exist ancient guidelines for human behaviour which are found in the teachings of the religions of the world and which are the condition for a sustainable world order' (2).

What separates the parliament's declaration from documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (and the model of social sustainability discussed below) is that the parliament does not view policy and legislation as a sufficient means of achieving the situation outlined in their declaration: as they argue, *there cannot be world order without a global ethic*. The UN, and in turn the Islamic Council, state that human rights are inalienable and unquestionable, and that these must be protected by law. While their notions of rights may be based on ethical principles, the assumption within these documents is that these ethical principles are already established, and that what is required is a process of enshrining them in law and policy.

The parliament's declaration, contrastingly, states that law, policy and other governance systems will ultimately be unsuccessful in sustaining human rights unless they are supported by an ethic, and moreover that this ethic is *not* well established and understood. 'A better global order cannot be created or enforced by laws, prescriptions, and conventions alone', they argue (6). 'We recall the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. What it formally proclaimed on the level of "rights" we wish to confirm and deepen here from the perspective of an *ethic*: The full realisation of the intrinsic dignity of the human person, the inalienable freedom and equality in principle of all humans, and the necessary solidarity and interdependence of all humans with each other' (5-6).

The emphasis of the parliament's declaration is thus on the initial development and acceptance of an ethic, rather than on the development, agreement and enforcement of policies and regulations to enforce particular aspects of that ethic. The authors note that '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' (4).

The remainder of the document lists four 'irrevocable directives', which are the fundamental principles for the global ethic. These are, in brief:

Commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life

- Do not kill./Have respect for life.
- Solve conflict peacefully and justly.
- Young people should be educated about non-violence.
- Protect the lives of animals and plants.
- Help others in need.

Commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order

- Do not steal./Deal honestly and fairly.
- Educate young people that ownership of property carries obligation.
- Resist oppression with non-violent means
- Use the world's riches to serve humanity.

Commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness

- Do not lie./Speak and act truthfully.
- Do not abuse authority.
- Young people must be taught to speak and act truthfully.

Commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women

- Do not commit sexual immorality./Respect and love another.
- Do not commit sexual exploitation or gender-based exploitation.
- Teach the young that the genders are equal.

- Understand that partnership is essential for a truly humane society.

The final section argues that such an ethos can only be realised through a transformation of consciousness. The declaration asks that all individuals and members of all professions and religions begin to formulate their own expressions of ethics, and pledge to work towards the transformation of consciousness they describe. In subsequent meetings of the parliament – notably the 2004 event in Barcelona – each member has committed to performing a series of commitments: ‘simple and profound acts’ designed to solve basic problems but also to facilitate the transformation of consciousness, often in concert with civil organisations.

3. The WACOSS model

The third main document I wish to examine is a ‘model of social sustainability’ developed by the Western Australian Council of Social Services. This document – the result of extensive focus group research to determine the key elements of a sustainable society – is one of the most well-developed theoretical models of social sustainability in circulation, although the comparison with global ethics declarations could also have been applied to several other policy frameworks.

The WACOSS model reduces social sustainability to five basic principles: equity, diversity, interconnectedness of life, quality of life, and democracy and governance. These are then expended into a series of overlapping characteristics which are briefly summarised here.

Equity

- There is equal opportunity for all members.
- There is equity for Indigenous people.
- There is equity in relation to human rights.
- There is equity in relation to disadvantaged members.

Diversity

- The community is inclusive of diverse groups.
- The community values difference.

Interconnectedness of life

- The quantity of social processes promote connectedness.
- The quality of social processes promote connectedness.
- The structures governing social processes promote connectedness.
- Public and civic institutions promote connectedness.
- Community services promote connectedness.
- Arts and culture promote connectedness.
- Planning and physical infrastructure promote connectedness.
- Media and communications promote connectedness.

- Recreation and sport promote connectedness.
- Transport promotes connectedness.

Quality of life

- Community members have a sense of belonging.
- Community members have a sense of place.
- Community members have a sense of self-worth.
- Community members have a sense of safety.
- Community members have a sense of connection with nature.
- Community members have a sense of empowerment and responsibility.
- Community members have a sense of self-reliance.
- Community members have a good quality of life in relation to education.
- Community members have a good quality of life in relation to health.
- Community members have a good quality of life in relation to employment.
- Community members have a good quality of life in relation to income and standard of living.
- Community members have a good quality of life in relation to housing.
- Community members have a good quality of life in relation to clean air, soil and water.
- Community members have opportunities for personal and social development.

Democracy and governance

- Community members have access to information, knowledge and expertise.
- Participation processes are open and accountable.
- Democratic processes and governance structures are effective.
- There is integrity of democratic processes and governance structures.
- Democratic processes and governance structures are accountable.
- Democratic processes and governance structures incorporate justice and legal rights.

The characteristics are further expanded into a series of ‘statements addressing the characteristics’, which add detail to ‘what our communities would look like if they were equitable, diverse, connected, democratic and provided a good quality of life’. A diagrammatic representation of the overlap of some of these characteristics with the environmental and economic aspects of sustainability rounds out the framework.

The authors of the WACOSS model note that ‘the principles of social sustainability are designed to capture the goals of socially sustainable communities and to this

end, are aspirational and visionary statements that describe what makes a community healthy and liveable, both now and in the future' (iv). The ultimate outcome of the project, however, is considerably less grandiose: a series of indicators to help gauge the extent to which housing projects in different communities contribute to achieving socially sustainable communities.

Comparisons, conclusion and further research

Examples of basic similarities between the three texts are given in the table on the following pages. All three documents draw their substance from commonly held ideas about what is right and desirable, and all are thus essentially visionary, optimistic and progressive. The apparent similarity in expression (phrases such as 'without distinction of' and 'development of personality' occur in all three texts) is probably because of the influence of the Universal Bill of Rights on the development of the other documents.

The table also shows clearly what the authors of the parliament's declaration mean when they speak of an 'ethic' rather than a series of 'rights' as the basic principle for collective moral action. While the UN declaration is framed in terms of entitlements, and the WACOSS policy document in terms of 'indicators' (desirable conditions), the parliament's declaration frames the issues in terms of *obligations and commitments* to a particular kind of action.

The UN declaration (and to a lesser extent the WACOSS model) operates on the principle that an assumed ethical standard will be maintained if rights are upheld, a process which it seeks to enable through policy and legislation. The religious view – and here I take the parliament's document to be representative of the potential contribution of religious belief to a sustainable society – is that the ethic is of paramount importance, and must not be assumed, but specified. They argue that it is not possible to legislate effectively for equality and sustainability, and that a widespread ethic supporting equality and sustainability must exist in order for policy and legislation to be effective.

If social sustainability is the discourse of a better society and how it can be achieved and maintained, then a key part of future social sustainability research will be the process of collecting and analysing information on what people perceive a better society to be, and what steps they think are necessary to achieve and sustain it. A necessary component of the social sustainability research agenda is, I argue, the understanding that religious belief already contains codified ideas on the ideal shape of society, and that these ideas have been further explored through previous studies in comparative religion and global ethics.

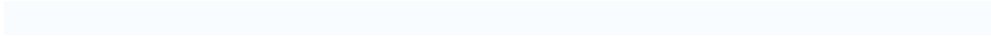
What might a future project in social sustainability and religious ethics look like? A large comparative study could be undertaken with attention to multiple religious

decrees and policy frameworks from numerous countries. New comparative tools (beyond the simple observations of similarity used here) would be required in a systematic comparison of policy frameworks and ethical decrees, and I believe the process of collecting and analysing the data would suggest these. Secondly, a grounded research project working with religious and non-religious participants could explore their views on social sustainability (what they perceive a sustainable society to be and how it might be achieved) and the way their religious belief shapes their responses to sustainability discourse and policy. Such a study would provide a useful base of information for theorising the interface between religious notions of improved social conditions and social policy-based expressions of improved social conditions, which would assist in theorising both the development and uptake of sustainability policy in a religious (or semi-religious) context.

Theme	Universal declaration	Parliament's declaration	WACOSS model (Social sustainability exists where...)
General statement of equity	Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status (2).	Every human being without distinction of age, sex, race, skin colour, physical or mental ability, language, religion, political view, or national or social origin possesses an inalienable and untouchable dignity, and everyone, the individual as well as the state, is obliged to protect it (7).	There is equal opportunity for all members. There is equity for Indigenous people. There is equity in relation to human rights. There is equity in relation to disadvantaged members.
Education	Everyone has the right to education (26(1)). Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms (26(2)).	Children have a right of access to education (4e). Young people must learn at home and in school. They have a right to information and education to be able to make the decisions that will form their lives (3c).	Community members have a good quality of life in relation to education.
Law and conflict resolution	Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law (6).	Conflicts should be resolved without violence within a framework of justice (1b).	Democratic processes and governance structures incorporate justice and legal rights.
Employment	Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment (23(1)).	All of directive 2: Commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order (2).	Community members have a good quality of life in relation to employment.

Standard of living	Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services (25(1))	We must value a sense of moderation and modesty instead of an unquenchable greed for money, prestige, and consumption (2e).	Community members have a good quality of life in relation to income and standard of living. Community members have a good quality of life in relation to housing. Community members have a good quality of life in relation to clean air, soil and water.
Democracy and openness	The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures (21(3)).	Commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness for the leaders of countries, politicians, and political parties, to whom we entrust our own freedoms.	Community members have access to information, knowledge and expertise. Participation processes are open and accountable. Democratic processes and governance structures are effective. There is integrity of democratic processes and governance structures. Democratic processes and governance structures are accountable. Democratic processes and governance structures incorporate justice and legal rights.
Culture	Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits (27(1))	All people have a right to life, safety, and the free development of personality insofar as they do not injure the rights of others (1a).	Arts and culture promote connectedness. Community members have opportunities for personal and social development.

Connectivity	Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible (29(1)).	We are interdependent. Each of us depends on the well-being of the whole, and so we have respect for the community of living beings, for people, animals, and plants, and for the preservation of Earth, the air, water and soil (introduction).	The quality of social processes promotes connectedness. The structures governing social processes promote connectedness. Public and civic institutions promote connectedness. Community services promote connectedness. Arts and culture promote connectedness.
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