

# Religious Identity and an Emerging Global Ethic

Michael S. Bos (1)

Globalization has expanded the parameters of what we are able to know and whom we are able to meet so that interaction between cultures, ethnicities, and religions is part of our daily experience. The interdependence of reality is no longer the subject of philosophical speculation; it is a reality of modern-day life.

Globalization is such a pervasive phenomenon that a global survey by the Pew Research Center shows that “People worldwide have become aware of the impact of increasing interconnectedness on their countries and their own lives.... The survey finds broad acceptance of the increasing interconnectedness of the world.”(2) The survey also found that “Large majorities in 42 of 44 countries believe that their traditional

way of life is getting lost and most people feel that their way of life has to be protected against foreign influence.”(3) This points to one of the primary challenges of globalization: How will cultures and religions refashion and preserve an identity in an interconnected and interdependent world?

## **Religious Identity: A Contributor to Conflict or Peace?**

The response to this question has been framed by Samuel Huntington, the author of seminal work on international relations in which he predicts that the reaction to the challenges of globalization will be a “clash of civilizations.” His book, by this same name, begins with a quote from Michael Dibdin’s novel, *Dead Lagoon*: “There can be no true friends without true enemies. Unless we hate what we are not, we cannot love what we are.”(4) This becomes an assumption about human nature that believes “enemies are essential” in the formation of identity. Therefore, if new

identities are emerging in an age of globalization, it is inevitable that enemies will be created in the process. As for religion's role in this, overall Huntington sees the religious influence as one of complicity and convenience rather than arising out of the core of religious doctrines. "Religion is a central defining characteristic of civilizations," and because of this, it is one of principal cultural resources for shaping identity.(5) As a global age has brought increased exposure to other cultures and religions, an identity crisis is forming; and "In coping with identity crisis, what counts for people are blood and belief, faith and family."(6) In the end, the pervasiveness of religion means that psychologically and practically, it provides the broadest and most supportive base to justify conflict with those we have fashioned as our enemies. Religion, according to Huntington, is the broadest canopy under which a culture can gather to defend its identity, and it has the added incentive of being able to ascribe divine sanction to conflict with "godless" others.(7)

In particular, he singles out Islam as playing a leading role in conflict. He observes, “Wherever one looks along the perimeter of Islam, Muslims have problems living peaceably with their neighbors. The question naturally arises as to whether this pattern of late-twentieth-century conflict between Muslim and non-Muslim groups is equally true of relations between groups from other civilizations. In fact, it is not.”(8) However, he points out that he does not know whether Muslims have historically been more involved in intergroup violence than people of other civilizations, but he does speculate about the causes of Muslim group violence in history, if indeed it ever existed.(9)

His perspective does not leave much hope for religion in general and Islam in particular as a contributor to a culture of peace. But it is important to note that the two theses that lead to such conclusions, i.e., enemies are essential in identity formation and the historical problem of peaceful coexistence in Islam, are not critically examined, and thus

his premise should not be the starting place. Alternative ways to frame the potential of religious identity must be examined, which this article intends to do. Further, because Huntington focused upon Islam, so too this article primarily uses Islam and Islamic identity as an example of the potential contribution religions can make to a culture of peace. Therefore examples cited are illustrative of religion and not intended to confine the possibilities within one faith.

If one surveys the growing number of interfaith initiatives, one can see another trend in religious identity that is a result of globalization.(10) The trend is this: there are a growing number of adherents of the world's religions that believe that even though there are diverse doctrines and beliefs, we share sufficient values and morals for a global ethic that guides our interactions and transactions with each other. One need not be religious to recognize the importance of this, because in an interdependent world, relationships between religions affect the global community.

Understanding this, UNESCO held a conference with the following premise:

Looking at international problems, it is easy to find religious components in existing wars and conflicts. Religions are often used to legitimate the ideological, economic or political interests which are the most immediate cause of conflicts. But religions can be of great help in the creation of a culture of peace that would make it possible to prevent conflicts, defuse violence and build structures that are fairer and freer....

Religions can remind us of the fundamental aspects of human dignity, of openness to others, of the real priorities in individual lives and the lives of all peoples. Religions can encourage us on the paths of generosity and cooperation. *Religion is a great source for insight and ethical courage.*(11)

One can also see a need for a global ethic that provides a moral foundation to economic globalization, which is the primary means through which we experience globalization. Economic globalization holds a hegemonic position that divides the world into producers and consumers, with financial progress and material gain the goal. In such a worldview, it is all too easy to associate morality and virtue with the level of material wealth possessed.(12) Such a basis for morality has obvious limitations. As one economist stated, “The absence of spirituality and love in the economics of globalization is profoundly injurious, as it has frozen our imaginations. In order to succeed in reversing the crises associated with economic globalization, we have to awaken a desire in people to ask deeper and bigger questions about life and its purpose. Globalization today desperately needs conscience, morality, ethics and spirituality.”(13)

All of this points to a growing sense from within the world’s religions, and a stated

need from the larger global community, that it is both possible and necessary for religions to find a shared ethical and moral framework that guides human interactions and transactions.

To many this may seem so commonsensical that it need not be stated; yet that is exactly the point. An underlying assumption about the nature of humanity is being formed that has largely bypassed the level of intentional religious discourse. In Aqil Kazin's study in the Emirates, he observes that "interaction with the new global system's elements, such as tourism, satellite television, the penetration of multinational corporations, etc., has increased popular awareness both of similarities and differences between Islamic culture and other cultures, and has facilitated the construction of an Islamic identity in relation to other cultures and societies." (14) Though Kazin shows indications that this is a positive development, what is left unanswered is what the content of this Islamic identity is and how such an identity relates itself to the world. Even though the identity is "religious,"

it does not mean that it has an articulated religious basis. We gain our identity from many sources, and there are many ways to shape and interpret those sources. If religions desire their faith communities to be instruments of peace and justice, then it will take intentionality to define and embrace these shared values as an expression of one's faith rather than as the threat of foreign influence.

## **An Emerging Global Ethic**

There is an emerging intentionality in articulating these shared values in *Towards a Global Ethic*.<sup>(15)</sup> This declaration represents “a set of minimum binding norms and values which might provide a basic ethical framework for humankind.”<sup>(16)</sup> It is a response to the global need for a unifying ethic that guides our relationships with one another. Even though it is founded upon religious teachings, it carries the goal of expressing shared values that non-religious persons could also embrace as legitimate values for humankind.

It builds upon the fundamental demands of two teachings found in the sacred traditions of the world: the first is that “every human being must be treated humanely,” and the second is the Golden Rule, “What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others.”(17) These two principles lead to four ethical directives:

1. A commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life
2. A commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order
3. A commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness
4. A commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women.(18)

These directives represent a paradigm shift in ethical perspective from two standpoints. First, it represents an ethical perspective that results from an interreligious process. This directs

people of faith to find their individual identities within, rather than over-against, the wider religious community. There is a growing sense that an interdependent world requires that “one must be religious *interreligiously*.”(19) Secondly, it reorients ethical perspective from a parochial approach, concerned only with the ethical responsibilities of persons within a society, to a global approach that attends to the ethical responsibilities between societies, cultures, and religions. Take, for example, a leading North American textbook on moral philosophy. It opens the discussion on morality by raising the question Socrates asked 2400 years ago: how ought we to live?(20) It is interesting to see how the text’s case studies infer an individualistic approach so that the question becomes: how ought I to live? At best, ethics is interpreted in a relativistic manner as the quest of a particular society’s answer to this question. This represents one of the weaknesses of contemporary discussion on ethics and one of the paradigm shifts necessary. Formerly, a religion’s concern

about others was limited to those within its direct sphere of influence, most often one of a ruling power to its subjects. In Islam it is out of this context that “the People of the Book” and *dhimmi* (protected scriptural minorities) were applied. Examples from the other world’s religions could be given.(21) Today, in an interconnected and interdependent world, the purview of concern has broadened to include our relationships with the world community, even though direct relationships may be minimal. Peaceful coexistence is no longer about political expediency but is a global necessity.

## **The Sustainability of Religious Identity**

One of the critical observations that may be directed at Islam, as well as all religions, is that those who embrace a *Global Ethic* are progressive thinkers who are willing to break from the strictures of a traditional Islamic approach.(22) This is another way of saying that embracing religious pluralism and

interfaith cooperation is a foreign influence upon Islamic identity rather than emanating from within the religion itself. Therefore it is concluded that such initiatives are symbolic in nature and do not represent a sustainable identity within an Islamic populace. However, if one looks at Islamic history, there exists a heritage of positively engaging a religiously plural world.

It may be helpful to look at two overarching principles that assess how religious identity is sustained in a changing world. The first is the *principle of movement*, which is what allows a tradition to engage the other, incorporate new understandings, and address the challenges of contemporary society in a positive way.(23) In the rapid growth of the Islamic empire, it found itself governing and engaging other cultures and religious traditions by developing categories of relationship, with concurrent laws, that would allow the coexistence of other religions within its territory. This points to the principle of movement at work. At a more fundamental

level, this principle is represented in the relationship of *Shariah* and *Fiqh*. “It is the fundamental purposes and principles of the Islamic law (the *Shariah*) which are God-given, not their detailed implementation (the *fiqh*). The latter is the product of particular contexts of time and place. It is therefore possible for the provisions of the law to change and develop as necessary and appropriate.”(24) This dynamic is important because in the face of modernization, one may perceive a gap between *fiqh* and contemporary issues and too quickly conclude that relating timeless truths to changing times is a new phenomenon to Islam.(25) It then appears that modernity is introducing the principle of movement to Islam, when, as we have seen, it is part of Islam’s earliest self-understanding. What history does reveal is that there were periods when Muslims lived on the *fiqh* heritage of their forefathers instead of engaging the practical problems of contemporary life--a central issue all religions face in their own way.(26) This does not reveal an absence of the principle of

movement but relates to a second principle at work.

The second principle of religious identity is the *principle of continuity*, which necessitates that one's religious identity is rooted in the sacred texts and traditions of the faith.(27) This has important implications in how one derives identity and orientation to the world. Where modern and post-modern approaches to contemporary issues are situational, i.e., governed by whatever values are held by the prevailing culture at that time, religious identity must be rooted in its own heritage. Therefore a new religious identity must be consistent with one's understanding of the tradition from which one comes. It is clear that Islam holds this as a central principle in religious identity.

These two principles represent the tension that exists in the establishment of a religious identity. When the principle of continuity is emphasized to the exclusion of the principle of movement, a traditionalist approach results, such as in medieval Islam

where “knowledge is better *conserved* than *created*.”(28) Here there is a distrust of things new and a confidence in the veracity of a particular past that one embraces as the Golden Age. On the other hand, if the principle of movement is emphasized to the exclusion of continuity, religious identity may be in name only and becomes the cloak over contemporary ideologies that have replaced the religious heritage from which one comes. In the end, religious identity becomes indistinguishable from secular orientations. If one jettisons continuity with sacred texts and traditions, “It threatens to reduce him to a hand-to-mouth existence in the moral sphere which may effectively sterilize his efforts at understanding events in a long-range perspective.” (29)

With this in mind, we can look at a more specific application of these principles within Islamic history. As its empire first grew, religious pluralism concerned primarily Jews and Christians. Based on the Qur’anic concept “People of the Book,” Islam viewed these

religions as *dhimmi* (protected scriptural minorities). This is well known. What is less often discussed is how an ever-growing empire addressed a broader range of religions. Besides Jews and Christians, “the category of *ahl al-kitab* was often extended to cover Zoroastrians, sometimes members of other faiths were included (e.g., Hindus).”<sup>(30)</sup> This extending of covenant to other faiths did not represent an abandonment of continuity from Islamic tradition. When we turn to the exegesis of Quranic texts about the Sabians, also mentioned in the Quran as one of the revealed religions, this religious group is employed as a way to address an expanding religious pluralism within a Quranic frame of reference. Because the identity of the original Quranic Sabians is uncertain, it created exegetical space within which application of the term could be made. "It was natural in the course of time for Muslim authors to extend the application of the term Sabian to cover not only communities from a far distant past, but also contemporary communities with which they themselves came in contact, including

some in Africa. Clearly, the term Sabian had by now proved to be the most meaningful and attractive nomenclature for comprehending foreign religiosities within what could still be considered a Quranic world view."(31) This becomes important because it counters the assumption that modern-day approaches to religious pluralism by many Islamic States have broken with past tradition.(32) History contains examples that show it can also be viewed as an extension of Islamic heritage, demonstrating the principles of movement and continuity being held in equilibrium to engage a changing world. This is not to say that one would want to reinstate the framework of relationships from the past, but only to show that the principles are at hand to adapt to changing needs.

## **Approaches to Religious Pluralism**

Within Christian scholarship, the field of the theology of religions, or theology of religious pluralism, is quickly becoming one of the

principal fields of interest. From a Christian perspective, this essentially addresses how Christians understand the place and role of other religions in the world. Most religions are devoting increasing scholarship to this, though not necessarily by this name. It is interesting to compare the developments in Christian scholarship with Islamic scholarship in this area.

In Christianity, one could generally characterize its history as one in which scholarly inquiry did not address the salvific potential of other religions per se; attention was more focused on the possibility of a positive attitude toward individuals outside the church than on the possibility of a more positive attitude towards other religions.(33) Today, interest in other religions as salvific structures has moved to the center of Christian scholarship. One of the current emphases is that one must attribute salvific value to other religions to be able to have a constructive relationship with them. On the one hand, this

is appealing because it seeks to give parity to religions and makes the possibility of relationship and cooperation easy to envision. On the other hand, if all religions in the end are the same, it seems to lead to the conclusion that “the distinctive features of other peoples’ faiths-precisely what makes them other-has, literally, no religious meaning.”(34) Theological inquiry is focusing upon how to engender relationships of trust and cooperation among a diversity of beliefs while respecting the integrity of an exclusive commitment to a faith.

Islam has addressed this issue but with a different approach and conclusion. Islamic literature addressed the issue of other religions as salvific structures from its earliest history. For example, in my own context we can look at the Ibadī document *The Epistle of Salim ibn Dhakwan* (سيرة سالم بن ذكوان), an 8th century AD text that contains a classification of opponents consistent with what later was referred to as *al-milal al-sitt wa-ahkamuha*.(35) The possibilities of

relationship with non-Muslims are correlated to the degree of God's revelation believed to exist within the religion, but the salvific value of other revealed religions is pre-Islamic. Islam is the true path, while the other revealed religions were salvific paths before the advent of Islam.(36) Relational possibilities were correlated with salvific value, but it was historical in orientation.(37) Based on what was said earlier about a Christian theology of religions, one would envision this was an impediment to embracing religious pluralism; yet Muslims could still envision themselves positively towards other religions. This was possible because a separate but related topic was the discussion of the character of relationships one should have with people of other faiths. This point is interesting to consider for those who believe that one must ascribe present-day salvific value to other religions to have positive relations. This is not to gloss over the limits of these relationships that may disagree with modern sensibilities, but one cannot overlook that these elements

were not coterminous yet positive relations were possible.

This raises a deeper issue that the scope of this article cannot address: “whether the pluralism of religions is a matter of fact or a matter of principle” in our religious identities.(38) This can be the difference between viewing pluralism as an obstacle or as a resource that enriches us all. *A Global Ethic* represents an emerging desire to draw upon the thread of commonality within pluralism that gives us all an essential way of being in the world. But we must also allow each faith a uniqueness of approach and perspective that founds its engagement of religious pluralism. Perhaps by disentangling these two elements lies the ability of the world’s religions to emphasize the character of relationship that yields “a minimal *fundamental consensus* concerning binding values, irrevocable *standards*, and fundamental *moral attitudes*” that direct all human interactions and transactions towards a culture of peace.(39)

## Concluding Thoughts

I readily admit that the historical scholarship presented is selective in nature, but I defend this selection because the purpose is not to present a survey of all that has occurred, but to point out what is possible predicated upon historical antecedents. We all choose the past we draw upon to justify our course for the future, and as people who share what seems to be an increasingly small space, we have an obligation to avoid a “conflict of historical recollection.” This is not to imply that conflict never occurs or that there is not deep historical pain, but in a global age, scholarship becomes an increasingly interreligious endeavor that calls upon us to look for “best practices” and possibilities rather than use each other’s historical low points, and we all have them, to validate a future of conflict. What Huntington portrays as inevitable is in reality a choice. To the opening question: *how will cultures and religions refashion and preserve an identity in an interconnected and interdependent world*, there are people of faith making the choice to

form identities that embrace our interdependence. As a Christian working within an Islamic context, I witness daily reasons to have hope that this will only continue. In the end, one could say that this work reflects a scholarly curiosity about everyday occurrences.

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[1] - Director, Al Amana Centre, Muscat, Oman.

2- Pew Center for the People & the Press, “Views of a Changing World,” June 3, 2003, <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=185>.

3- Pew Research Center, “Views of a Changing World.”

4- *The Class of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone,

1996) p. 20. In sociology this would be expressed as “oppositional identity,” that is, we articulate our identity not by who we are, but by who we are not; Huntington has pressed the outer limits of this concept.

5- p. 47.

6- p. 126.

7- p. 267.

8- p. 252.

9- pp. 262-265.

10- An excellent resource and sampling of such initiatives is *A Source Book for Earth's Community of Religions*, ed. Joel Beversluis (CoNexus Press & Global Education Associates, 1995 rev. ed.)

11- United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), “The Contribution of Religions to a Culture of Peace,” Conference held April, 1993, italics added, in *A Source Book*, p. 181.

- 12- For a secular view, this is strangely reminiscent of a religious view that holds those who are wealthy possess divine favor.
- 13- Kamran Mofid, “Global Capitalism in Crises: Globalization and Business for the Common Good – Theology and Economics Working Together,” *Interreligious Insight: a Journal of Dialogue and Engagement*, Vol 1, No. 3 (July, 2003), p. 18
- 14- *The United Arab Emirates A.D. 600 to the Present: A Socio-Discursive Transformation in the Arabian Gulf* (Gulf Book Centre, 2000), p. 423.
- 15- *A Source Book*, pp. 131-136. This document had its first formal presentation, then called the *Declaration of a Global Ethic*, at the 1993 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago, U.S.A.
- 16- Dr. Daniel Gómez-Ibáñez, “Moving towards a Global Ethic” in *A Source Book*, p. 130.
- 17- p. 133.

18- pp. 133-135.

19- Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theology of Religions* (Orbis Books, 2002), p. 10.

20- James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 4th ed. (McGraw Hill, 2003), p. 1.

21- For example, traditional orthodox Hindu sources demonstrate that in history little concern was paid to the non-Hindu, the *mleccha*, unless it was how a Hindu king must deal with *mleccha* within his kingdom. See Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Orbis Books, 2000), pp. 53 & 54.

22- For an example of the perceived limitations of interreligious dialogue, see Christian Troll S.J., "Christian-Muslim Relations in Germany," *Encounter: Documents for Muslim-Christian Understanding*, No. 306 (June-July 2004), pp. 19-21.

23- Marshall G.S. Hodgson, edited, with an introduction and conclusion, by Edmund Burke, III, *Rethinking world history: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 237; this is addressing the work of Muhammad Iqbal, of which Hodgson is critical, but I'm applying these two principles to religious identity rather than the processes of history as a helpful tool in understanding the tensions involved in the development of religious identity.

24- Jorgan S. Nielsen, "Shariah, Change and Plural Societies," in *Religion, Law and Society* (Geneva, WCC Publications, 1995), 28.

25- Albert Hourani, *The History of The Arab Peoples* (Faber and Faber, 1991), pp. 307 & 308, speaking in particular about Muhammad 'Abduh's work.

26- Tayyib Z. Al-Abdin, "The Implications of *Shariah, Fiqh, and Qanun* in an Islamic State" in *Religion, Law and Society*, p. 24.

27- Hodgson, p. 237.

28- Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 85.

29- Huntington, p. 236.

30- Ronald L. Nettler, "Dhimmi" in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Vol. I (Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 374 & 375.

31- Christopher Buck, "The Identity of the Sabi'un: An Historical Quest," *The Muslim World*, Vol. LXXIV, Nos. 3-4 (July-October 1984), p. 178.

32- Nettler, pp. 374 & 375. He sees the *dhimmi* status as meaningless in modern society, rather than present-day policy as an extension of this heritage. Also see Cyril Glasse, "Dhimmi," in *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, (Altamira Press, 2001 rev. ed.), p. 117.

33- Knitter, pp. 64-68. Also see Jacques Dupuis, S.J., *Toward a Christian Theology of*

*Religious Pluralism* (Orbis Books, 1997). In Dupuis one can see the range of historical thought upon which this generalization is based.

34- S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Orbis Books, 1995), p. 7.

35- Patricia Crone and Fritz Zimmermann, *The Epistle of Salim ibn Dhakwan* (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 197. See 195 ff. for a detailed discussion of these categories.

36- See Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), especially her conclusion on p. 290. One can compare the early Ibadi tafsir of هواري (9th century AD) or that of the standard Ibadi reference أطفيش (13th/14th century AD) on سورة البقرة 62 and find a similar conclusion.

37- As demonstrated in a previous example, a Qur'anic framework was used based on this

understanding to engage positively an expanding religious pluralism.

38- Dupuis, p. 386, citing Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (SCM Press, 1990), p. 164.

39- *A Source Book*, p. 132.