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DIALOGUE ON RELIGIOUS ETHICS: A FORGOTTEN DIMENSION IN INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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Abstract

The present article argues for a revival of interreligious (and intercultural) dialogue on ethics and law as an instrument of peace. Whereas the first phase of Interreligious Dialogue was marked by a considerable prominence of these topics, they later fell practically into oblivion. This state of affairs is lamentable for two reasons, one theoretical and the other practical. Theoretically the rationality of dogmatic or systematic insights (as found in all faith traditions) is largely exclusive, whereas the rationality of ethics, also religiously founded ethics, is basically inclusive. This means it is open to dialogue and common ground can be found which norms, rules and values better serve humans, the society and the political community they live in. This is of particular importance in today's multi-religious societies and a world strongly interconnected because of globalization. The article concludes with some practical examples that were geared to form an interreligious alliance of the moderate.

Keywords: Christianity, Culture, Dialogue, Ethics, Globalization, Interreligious Overlapping Consensus, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Multi-religious Societies, Norms, Peace, Values

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During the past decades, interreligious dialogue has become a multifaceted international movement. This allows for further reflections on its aims and purposes. Its original aim was to contribute to peace in view of an ever-growing global interconnectedness, of increasing religious pluralism, and of the more prominent role religion had come to play in politics since the 1980s. Expectations that interreligious dialogue could contribute to justice and peace were high at that time. Today, however, questions of ethics have become marginal in interreligious dialogue.[1] This may have to do with the fact that the models presented in the 1980s mainly by Hans Küng and Leonard Swidler either were overly ambitious in their expectations of levelling out the differences that existed in religious traditions, or they regarded these ethical traditions as equally valid, not recognizing the need for debate with regard to fundamental ethical questions.[2] The paradigmatic shift that took place brought specifically religious themes to the centre in interreligious dialogue: God or the Divine, symbols, rituals, and prayer, pushing ethical issues aside.

The present article argues that it is imperative to take up anew the initial inspiration of interreligious dialogue and to stress its ethical dimensions, individual as well as political. In a globalized world peace last but not least depends on peaceful relations between religions and on a high degree of consensus on the norms and virtues followed by the faithful of major religious traditions. This requires multifaceted interreligious dialogues on ethics which also, as is to be shown, allow for greater common ground than it is the case with questions of faith in the narrower sense.

1. Ethics and Dialogue: Some Basic Reflections

Ethics may be defined as the *systematic reflection* on norms, virtues, rules, and role models as they exist in any society, culture and/or religion.[3] It is based on the universal fact that what *is* done by

[1] Thus, Catherine Cornille, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Interreligious Dialogue,* Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2013, with all its excellent contributions contains no article on ethics and interreligious dialogue. There are but two articles on social praxis, cf. Paul F. Knitter, "Inter-Religious Dialogue and Social Action" and S. Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana, "Inter-Religious Dialogue and Peacebuilding," 133-148 and 149-167.

[2] The debate on the World Ethos Project of Hans Küng and the Global Ethics Project of Leonard Swidler have been documented in many articles of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 42, 3 (2007).

[3] The terminology differs. Thus, in the Anglo-American context ethics often goes by the name of moral philosophy.

humans, that is their praxis, differs from what *ought to* be done by them, that is the actions that are considered to be desirable according to norms and values. This inherent "ethical difference" constitutes an anthropological constant. Norms are not needed for matters where the factual state never differs from what ought to be done. There would be no commandment "Though shalt not kill," if humans never killed each other. This ethical difference is a rather astonishing anthropological phenomenon specific to humans, found with no other creatures. It has at least two different dimensions: What has been called *ethos* (in Greek pasture, home) constitutes a sort of common ethical language people adhere to in a particular community. They do the good they are demanded to do and refrain from what is considered to be bad and harmful. The reflection on what is to be considered "good" and "bad" — this may be seen as a second dimension — reflects on the existing norms and values. It also constitutes a universal element of human culture.[4] Ethical wisdom passed on from generation to generation can differ and change in time, but there is also a great deal of continuity. In the same way there is quite a bit of common ground between the different *ethoi,* that is the moral practices in various cultures and the religious traditions. This is despite all rifts even more the case in a globalized world where the exchange between these cultures has taken on an intensity that never existed before.[5]

The history of humankind shows that core norms and values are mostly based on religious teachings, such as the Decalogue in the Jewish and Christian faith traditions. They are often interwoven with cultural habits. As the German sociologist Max Weber has shown, it is elite groups that effectively interpret and also adapt existing moral codes.[6] Thereby not only individual behaviour and actions, but also laws as well as social and political institutions are subject to ethical reflection. This is also an important element of their evolution in time.

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[4]This has been one of the fundamental insights of the axial age theory. Cf. Robert N. Bellah, ed., *Religion in Human Evolution. From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011; from an ethical perspective Ingeborg Gabriel, "Antigone war nicht nur hier," in Patricia Hladschik, and Fiona Steinert, ed., *Menschenrechten Gestalt und Wirksamkeit verleihen. Making Human Rights Work. Festschrift für Manfred Nowak und Hannes Tretter*, Vienna: NWV Verlag, 2019, 719-730.

[5]For details, Ingeborg Gabriel, "Weltethos in Bewegung: Zwischen religiöser und säkularer Ethik," in Erwin Bader, ed., *Weltethos und Globalisierung*, Münster: LIT Verlag, 2008, 149–162.

[6]For his much-debated hypothesis on the influence of Protestant ethics on the formation of capitalism, cf. Max Weber, *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* I-III, Tübingen: Mohr 1988, particularly volume I, 17-206.

To reflect on the good and the just is an anthropological constant which exists, at least in rudimentary forms, everywhere and at all times, since humans are not guided by instinct, but act in freedom and do reflect on their acts. This means that they can and indeed have to freely decide on their actions. Thereby they not only to judge on what is right or wrong, but also reflect on the norms, virtues, and role models as handed down by society in an ongoing process. The extent to which this is the case depends on a variety of factors, such as pluralism and contact with other cultures and their norms. Human freedom as an anthropological constant is recognized by all religions. None of them sees humans as robots and their actions as determined by fate only. All religions thus recognize the difference between the praxis of individuals and the good and just to be done. Moreover, the norms, values, and virtues show a high degree of overlapping consensus in all cultures and societies, even if founded on different forms of religious reasoning, on different holy scriptures and traditions of wisdom. As an example, we may consider the fundamental norm: "Though shalt not kill." There can be no culture in which manslaughter is considered desirable and goes with impunity. This may seem rather banal, but the obvious fact is that cultural variations of norms existing in time and space often tend to obscure even higher degree of basic commonalities. At the same time these norms are subject to interpretations and re-interpretations and thus to change over time. Power interests and outside influences may also play a considerable role in this process. Even though the fundamental norm "Though shalt not kill" thus can be and indeed has been interpreted in rather different ways, depending on the range of the obligation (e. g. the concession to kill others in a war) and on the legal sanctions applied (e. g. the legitimation or rejection of death penalty) these changes are part of an ongoing process of ethical debates locally as well as globally.

The sheer speed of contemporary changes and innovations and the acceleration in global communication tend to exert strong pressure on culturally and religiously based mores as well as on the religious authorities the duty of whom it is to interpret and re-interpret them. The result might be an inability to cope with this "runaway world" [7] and the retreat into fundamentalist ghettos. [8] This the more, since

[7]Cf Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalisation Is Reshaping Our Lives,* New York: Routledge, 2000.

[8]The term "fundamentalism" has been contested because of its haziness as well as its usage as an ideological weapon. It is still useful, however, for describing religious worldviews that are exclusivist in theory and practice. Martin Riesebrodt defines it

globalization has been coupled with a widespread Western hegemony, that may inspire religiously motivated political protests. Interestingly enough, most of these protests are directed against the introduction of new social and political norms. Traditional morality thus serves as an identity marker for religious believers and becomes a privileged expression of their beliefs. At the same time an intensification of global contacts makes the observance of traditional norms, rules, and virtues often difficult while new forms of freedom tend to become attractive. In this sense one may observe a "clash within civilizations" not a "clash of civilizations."[9] Regimes that enforce such norms thereby necessarily become repressive. The discrepancy between the search for new, more liberal modes of behaviour and isolationist religious tendencies creates peace threating tensions within nations but also between them in today's world.[10] It also increases the need for ethical reflection on matters on ethics that further human life and social ties, and those which do not, in all areas of life. This poses fundamental ethical questions for all religions. Interreligious dialogue should therefore play an important role in this process of finding ethical consensus.

After all, man is not only a moral, but also a dialogical being. In this sense Greek philosophers spoke of the human being as "he/she who *has the word*" (*logon echon)*, indicating that verbal communication and reasoning are essential characteristics of the human race. *Dia-logou* literally means "through the word" as well as "through reason" — *logos* in Greek denoting both word and reason. It stands for a form of communication that recognizes the other as an equal human being, endowed with freedom and the ability to reflect, that is, as a being that has ideas and convictions worth listening to. Dialogue thus constitutes the very opposite of violence, which is ultimately mute, and which therefore denies the other's dignity. Listening to the other, we admit and indeed appreciate that he/she is able to contribute to

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as "a social and religious movement, the aim of which is to answer to a stipulated dramatic social crisis by a radical return to sacred principles, norms and laws which are thought to be eternally valid," cf. Martin Riesebrodt, "Was ist religiöser Fundamentalismus?" in Clemens Six, Martin Riesebrodt, and Siegfried Haas, ed., *Religiöser Fundamentalismus: Vom Kolonialismus zur Globalisierung,* Vienna: Universitätsverlag, 2005, 13-33, at 18.

[9] This is against the hypothesis of Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" in *Foreign Affairs* 73, 3 (1993) 22-49, expanded in Samuel Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order,* Simon & Schuster: New York, 1996.

[10] Cf. the contributions in Peter L. Berger, ed., *Between Relativism and Fundamentalism. Religious Resources for a Middle Position*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010.

the ethical insights important for the human condition. Dialogue presupposes that the truth — be it religious, ethical or simply factual — does exist, but that no single human being possesses it ever in its fullness. The same holds true for cultures and religions. Therefore, as Claude Levy-Strauss, the great French anthropologist, wrote: "The only thing that can become fatal for a group of humans, and a real burden, that will prevent it to fully realize its own nature, is to be alone."[11] All humans, individuals as well as groups, but also cultures and religions, in their search for the truth need others.

The word and with it dialogue also plays a central role in religions. The monotheistic religions as religions of the book hold the word in particularly high esteem. They are based on the belief that God spoke and speaks to humans and that He creates the universe by His word. To cite a Psalm: "By the Lord's word the heavens were made; by the breath of his mouth all their host" (Ps 33:6).[12] In Christianity, the centrality of the word culminates in Jesus Christ's being the Word of God (Jn 1:1). The relevance of the word, that is of speech and reason as essential feature of human existence is thus theologically enhanced and deepened. If it is God who through His words inspires, orients, and admonishes, this also confers a high status on dialogue and communication at the intra-human level. If God speaks to humans, then he and she are to speak to each other through the word, *dia-logou*. The revealed idea of creation through the word moreover confirms that the divine and therefore also human words are powerful.

As has already been hinted at, dialogues, and thus also interreligious as well as intercultural dialogues, do have ethical presuppositions. Three are to be named here: (1) the recognition of the other as equal, (2) compassionate respect, and (3) gratitude for the other's insights combined with a serious search for truth.[13] The recognition of the equality of the participants as rational and moral human beings makes a demand at the theoretical as well as at the practical level. Thus, albeit women, for instance, are generally

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[11] Claude Levi-Strauss, *Race et Histoire,* ed. Gonthier: UNESCO 1961, at 73 (translation Ingeborg Gabriel).

[12] Biblical quotations are from the *New American Bible*, Washington, DC: Confraternity of Christian Doctrine 1969.

[13]These criteria partly overlap with those of Catherine Cornille, "Conditions for Inter-Religious Dialogue," in Catherine Cornille, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Interreligious Dialogue,* Oxford: John Wiley & Sons 2013, 20-33, more extensively: Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Inter-Religious Dialogue,* New York: Herder & Herder Book 2008.

recognized as equal human beings, the praxis may not be in agreement with the values proclaimed.

Compassionate respect constitutes a moral attitude important in all areas of social life, but particularly in interreligious and intercultural dialogue. As experience shows human vulnerability is particularly great when religious beliefs and ethical convictions are at stake, since they touch the deepest layers of human identity. Any such dialogue, therefore, requires a high degree of not only intellectual but also moral subtlety so as not to wound the other in what is most precious to him/her. On the other hand, conversations about those truths which are most important to us can also create deep bonds between human beings. The word *religio* etymologically derives from *religare,* to bind together. Such bonding may also take place between believers of different religions. In this way it can in turn nourish gratitude because of the new insights gained, both regarding the other's and one's own religion. A personal anecdote may demonstrate this: in one of my first interreligious encounters, a Muslim participant told us that the Quran is always placed on a high place in the room and no other books are piled upon it. I made this a habit also with the Bible, and even after decades I remember this with gratitude. There are many similar stories, showing that interreligious encounters can and indeed do influence our own practice in a positive way.

The third element is the serious search for truth. As Albert Camus once wrote: "Dialogue is only possible between people who remain what they are and who speak the truth (they believe in)" ("Il n'y a de dialogue possible qu'entre des gens qui rest ce qu'ils sont and qui parlent vrai"). This is to show that any dialogue starts out with positions and identities which those who hold them consider to be true and well founded. At the same time, our identities, religious and other, as well as our ethical convictions are in constant evolution, because we search for the truth without ever possessing it, our grasp of it remaining fragmentary throughout our lives under the condition of human contingency. We form identities on the basis of our beliefs, but our insights in them are never complete. The tension between these two sides constitutes the basis of any dialogue. Particularly with regard to religious beliefs and truths which strongly shape identities, we have to recognize that as finite beings we never are able to comprehend God or the Divine in His/its infiniteness. The transcendental character of any theological notions must be taken seriously. Quite obviously its "object" — God — must remain a supreme mystery which transcends human knowledge. Religious language, therefore, is always by far more inadequate in divine

matters than it is adequate. This simple and self-evident fact should immunize against a positivist understanding of religious truths without in any way relativizing them. There would have been by far fewer religious conflicts, if people had kept in mind that our ignorance in divine matters by far exceeds our knowledge of them.[14] This is not the case with regard to ethical insights which — as will be shown below — follow another type of rationality. Here, the rules and norms on which we depend on for interaction and a decent social life can be recognized at least in outline. It is for this reason that they can and indeed must be subject to ongoing debates.[15]

2. Dialogue on Religious Beliefs vs. Dialogue on Religious Ethics: Some Characteristics

At the beginning of my lecture on ethics, I usually tell a Jewish story about two rabbis who debated whether it was good that God had created the world. Yes, says the one, look at all the marvels: sunrises and sunsets, the sea and woods, large and small creatures, and all the wonderful moments in life. No, insists the other, don't you see the pain and senseless destruction in nature: floods and earthquakes, animals devouring each other, and man being worse than them all, sickness and death. As the debate came to no end, both paused, reflected and then one of them said with gravity: Since God has created the world, man has to meditate and ponder his deeds.

The tale mirrors the importance of ethics, that is the discursive reflection on human actions and laws in Judaism. The same holds true, also in other world religions, particularly in the monotheistic religions. Any look at the sheer quantity of writings dedicated to ethical questions shows that all through history religious thinkers devoted great efforts to the discernment of ethical questions. This can be understood insofar as the complexity of social relations, changing social conditions as well as technical and other inventions require ever new ethical answers. Whereas the grand truths underlying belief systems are rather stable, the immense number of life situations requires ever new and rather differentiated responses so as to give guidance to believers how to act rightly, just and good to please God and do justice to His commandments.

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[14]This is the wording of the he Fourth Lateran Council (1215) of the Catholic Church, cf. Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* ed. by Peter Hünermann, 37th edition, Freiburg: Herder, 1991, number 806, 361.

[15]This insight can already be found in Aristotle, who argues that it would be meaningless to expect the same exactness from ethics as from mathematical formulas, cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1094b-1095a11.

Theological reasoning proper, that is the reflection of the truths pertaining to God and the Divine, and ethical reflection, that is the discourse on human deeds and laws, thereby follow rather different patterns of rationality. It is for this reason that dialogue on topics of theology and dialogue on religious ethics should be seen as distinctive and be treated separately. This hypothesis merits a closer look.

Creeds (and cults) are particular to each religion and therefore mutually exclusive.[16] Those who are theists cannot be non-theists. Those who believe in the Quran as God's final word to Mohammed as the (last) Prophet, will not consider the New Testament their Holy Scripture and Jesus the Anointed Son of God. The same holds true conversely for Christian beliefs. Jews will not accept the New Testament as their Holy Book and neither will Muslims. For them, their Holy Book is the Hebrew Bible or the Quran through which God has revealed Himself according to their faiths. The list of mutually exclusive beliefs could easily be expanded. This exclusivity of their respective beliefs constitutes an everyday experience of religious people all over the world. It shapes their religious identities and creates clear borders and even walls between different religions. These religious beliefs specific to one religion cannot be held by believers of another religion and they mark differences between them which are meant to last. With regard to interreligious dialogue it is not to create a syncretistic religious Esperanto, which means that dialogue is to enable believers of different creeds to learn from each other and better understand other religious traditions in order to also better understand their own.

Dialogue on religious ethics are of a different nature. Ethical norms, virtues and role models are by no means necessarily mutually exclusive but can be and most often are *inclusive* and thus open to a shared process of debate and interpretation. In this field there exists a wide range of similarities and of overlapping consensus between different religions, as between humans in general.[17] One may thus say that ethical concepts, norms, virtues and rules even when based on religious foundations may be subject to ethical reasoning. This different epistemological status of theology in the narrow sense and ethics has to do with the fact that they focus on different "objects":

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[16]This exclusiveness must not be confounded with the much-debated *normative* notion of religious exclusivism, cf. Klaus von Stosch, *Komparative Theologie als Wegweiser in der Welt der Religionen*, Paderborn: Schöningh, 2012, particularly 62-87.

[17]With regard to the terminology, cf. Leonard Swidler, *After the Absolute: The Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection,* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990.

The theological reflection on God or the Divine starts out with beliefs that have their origin in revelation, mystical experience, and/or meditation within the respective religious traditions. The object of ethics, on the other hand, are human deeds, laws and institutions, that is the praxis of individuals as well as social entities. Even if they form part of a particular revelation and/or tradition, they are also part of a common human experience and thus can easily be understood by others who share the same everyday knowledge. The Decalogue, to give but one prominent example, starts with the revelation of God on Mount Sinai. The first three commandments are specific to Israel, however, the other seven are part of a universal ethics: To treat one's parents well, not to kill, not to perform adultery, not to steal, not to lie and not to desire others' property — these norms can be found in most other ethical traditions.

In this sense ethics has to do with universally relevant questions such as: How should I act towards my neighbour, mother, father, children? How can I do justice to each of these persons? How should laws be conceived in order to be just and serve a peaceful and decent society? These and other questions are subject to human reasoning everywhere and at all times. The conscientious application of the insights gained is regarded as the responsibility of humans in any society. Even if many of the norms are seen as being revealed and laid down in sacred scriptures, as is the case in the monotheistic religions, particularly in Judaism and Islam, they also belong to everyday human practice. They may become a source of wisdom that other peoples are to imitate (cf. Deut 4:8). The meditation on and interpretation of religious texts on ethics and law thus aims at a praxis which ethical reflection wants to change so as to improve it.[18] This holds true for religiously as well as non-religiously founded ethics, that is philosophical ethics. Their intention and ultimate goal are the just, loving, compassionate person, as well as a good society with just institutions and laws that effectively further the common good.

Why, however, does there exist an overlapping consensus on norms, rules and virtues, which in this form cannot be found between religious beliefs? Three reasons are to be mentioned in brief. Firstly, the *anthropology* of religions, particularly monotheistic religions, shows remarkable similarities. In all of them the special status of

[18]Thus, Aristotle writes: "The part of philosophy with which we are dealing now is not merely theoretical, like the others. We reflect not only to know what is ethically good but also to become good persons. Otherwise this reflection would be useless," Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics,* II 2: 1103b (translation Ingeborg Gabriel).

humans derives from their particular relationship to God, their creator. The intimate linkage with the Transcendent distinguishes humans from other creatures also in other religions, constituting the source of their dignity as well as the reason for their responsibility towards others and the rest of creation. Dignity and responsibility are eminent ethical categories in Judaism as well as in Christianity. Humans who are created in God's image and likeness are to govern the earth (Gen 1:27f). The Hebrew term *ṣelem* in the original text thereby denotes a statue representing the king in the central square of Oriental cities. In an analogous way, humans are to be God's representatives on earth. From this, further characteristics of what it means to be human are derived in Jewish as well as in Christian theology. The Quranic notion of humans being the *khalif* (vice-regent) of God on earth who are to pass just judgement carries a similar message (Sura 38:26).[19] Asian religions affirm the divine presence in the human person, albeit in a different way. A gracious example for this is the Indian greeting "*namaste*" as homage to the presence of the Divine in the other person. The divide between humans and the non-human creation is, however, more fluid here because of the belief in reincarnation.[20] In view of present debates on ecological ethics it should be added that these religious beliefs in the special status of humans are not meant to be a cause for pride but a reason to act responsibly.[21]

Particularly in the monotheistic religions faith and ethics are closely intertwined. It is for this reason that by far the largest part of religious scholarship in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is devoted to ethical and legal issues. The Jewish Talmud, the Islamic sharia, and Christian moral theology all contain extensive debates on ethical and legal questions.[22] This serious striving for moral truth corresponds

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[19] Cf. Rotraud Wielandt, "Man and His Ranking in the Creation: On the Fundamental Understanding of Islamic Anthropology," in Andreas Bsteh et al., ed., *Islam Questioning Christianity,* Mödling: Verlag St Gabriel, 2007, 75–107, Mualla Seldcuk, Richard Heinzmann, and Felix Körner, ed., *Menschenwürde: Grundlagen im Islam und Christentum* (German and Turkish), Ankara: Üniversitesi Basimevi, 2006.

[20]The belief in reincarnation leads to another concept of responsibility, cf. George Chemparathy, "Der Mensch im Wesenskreislauf," in Andreas Bsteh et al., ed., *Der Hinduismus als Anfrage an christliche Theologie und Philosophie*, Studien zur Religionstheologie 3, Mödling: Verlag St Gabriel, 1997, 279–289.

[21] Cf. Ingeborg Gabriel, "Christliche Umweltspiritualität als Antwort auf die Umweltkrise," in Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach, Madalina Diaconu, ed., *Environmental Ethics and Cross-Cultural Explorations,* München: Alber Verlag, 2020, 58-78 (forthcoming).

[22]Christian theology is often thought to be more interested in dogma than ethics. This, however, is only the case during some periods. Thus, the *Summa* of Thomas

with the importance given to right action in order to be justified before God who is believed to be the supreme judge. The notion of a Last Judgement, be it at the end of individual lives or at the end of times, is common to all monotheistic religions. This means, that the individual believer will be judged not only and often not only primarily according to his/her faith but according to the observance of the norms, rules and laws, that is on the ground how he/she treated other human beings according to God's law. This is summed up in the words of the prophet Micah: "You have been told, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do the right and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic 6:8). For Christianity the Last Judgement as envisaged in Matthew (Mt 25:36-43) makes final salvation depend on the compliance with the law of love towards the poorest, in whom Christ Himself is to be present for the faithful. The judgement of God is prominent in all prophetic teachings, be it in the Hebrew bible, the New Testament or the Quran (cf. Sura 99). The belief that humans are individually responsible before God, who will judge them by their deeds at the end of their lives, in all these faith traditions constitutes the theological basis of human responsibility. Right action — and not only the right creed — is required to be saved, whichever form this salvation may take.[23] It is mainly for this reason, that the intellectual efforts in ethics in all monotheistic religions testify to a keen sense for the need of ethical discernment in the various situations of life. The story of Rabbi Hillel who was once asked by a pupil whether he could teach him the Torah standing on one foot has become famous. The rabbi cited the Golden Rule and added "the rest is commentary." This answer, however, was by no means meant to discourage differentiations in ethics and law, quite to the contrary. They have always been regarded as a vital part of religious theology and

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Aquinas, the most important medieval Catholic theologian, contains hundreds of disputations on ethics — by far more than on theological questions proper.

[23]Divine judgement as the source of human responsibility has, as far as I see, hardly been reflected on in the theology of religion and interreligious dialogue. A marginal reference can be found in Jacques Dupuis, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism,* New York: Maryknoll, 1997, 321-326 and in Tilman Nagel, *Geschichte der islamischen Theologie. Von Mohammed bis zur Gegenwart*, München: Beck, 1994, 31-38, for whom it is a core theme of Islamic theology. Its importance in Christian history and theology has been documented recently by Peter Brown, *The Ransom of the Soul. Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015. In Asian religion the notion of *karma* might be seen as an equivalent. Albeit from a rather different religious point of departure, it also holds the belief that the deeds of a person have effects in his/her life as well as thereafter.

culture, their aim being to enable the faithful to act righteously and responsibly under changing political and private circumstances so as to please God.[24]

Secondly, ethical insights are universal in the sense that a debate on them can be held and different concepts can be understood independent of cultural contexts. The Jewish-American philosopher Michael Walzer has used a memorable picture to demonstrate this ethical insight. When, he writes, we see people in the streets. wherever it is, for instance in Prague in 1989, carrying signs which say "Truth" and "Justice" we can basically understand what they want to communicate, although we may not exactly know what their political demands in the concrete situation are.[25] The same holds true for ethical texts we find in holy scriptures or philosophical ethics. Whereas the pagan Gods of Greece and their significance needs to be studied by specialists, the ethical knowledge imparted by Plato and Aristotle cannot only be understood, but even can become of existential relevance today. Moreover, any look at the norms, values, and virtues shows that there is considerable overlapping consensus in all cultures and religions on what is considered to be good, just, and desirable, and on how humans ought to act. This astonishing phenomenon can be attributed to the fact that the physical, psychological and social needs of humans are rather similar at all times and in all places. They are in this sense universal, even if culturally shaped in different ways. Even though specific emphasis may be given to particular norms and virtues in different societies, basic ethical notions such as justice, truthfulness, peace and love, kindness, and compassion may therefore be considered universal. This has last but not least to do with the fact that a society based on opposite principles of injustice, violence, lies, and enmity or disregard for the other would not only be inhumane but could not thrive or perhaps would not even be able to survive. The rules, norms, and virtues under which humans live and which give direction to their lives are thus not arbitrary, even though there are cultural and religious variations and interpretations.[26]

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[24]For an overview of the notion of law in Greek philosophy and the monotheistic creeds cf. Rémi Brague, *The Law of God. The Philosophical History of an Idea*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

[25]Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin. Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994, at 1.

[26]A different position is held by Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, Second Edition, London: Duckworth, 1987.

These differences in mores and norms can be brought into a fruitful interreligious dialogue. The central questions can and indeed have to be discussed between theologians of different religions, thereby enlarging the existing consensus. The debate on those norms, virtues, and moral examples which are to be praised and those which are to be rejected is not new, brought in from the outside world; it has been the subject of ongoing debates in all cultures and religions throughout history. These have, I would dare to say, also brought about a certain progress in the field of moral reasoning and practice, albeit the struggles were hard, and regressions remain possible. However, the changes in the status of women, the abolition of torture as of slavery, the help for refugees, the reduction of poverty and the insight that poverty should be eradicated, are considerable. These and other global developments, which hardly anybody would want to reverse, show that moral and legal progress may be possible. They are also intensely discussed within religious communities and despite all counter-currents integrated into religious ethical traditions.

Thirdly: this process of ethical reasoning within different religious and other traditions is furthered and indeed made possible by the fact, that religious norms are pluriform, evolve in time and cross-fertilize each other. Ethical and legal commandments and the religious texts in which they are laid down have been subject to interpretation and re-interpretation throughout the ages.[27] This long-term evolution of religious reasoning on ethics has brought about a wealth of insights, the aim of which is to find more humane and better solutions. This ongoing process takes place in each religion in the context of different schools, with scholars within each religion often holding rather divergent views on what is good and just in particular cases and situations. Religious ethical reasoning has never been monolithic. This holds true for the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions as well as for those of other religions. This inherent pluriformity of ethical norms in all religious traditions and the different forms of argumentation used show that ethical reflections

[27]With regard to the question of hermeneutics cf. Ingeborg Gabriel, "Truth in Earthen Vessels. Reflections on Contextuality," *The Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* (edited by Assad Elias Kattan and Radu Preda) 69 (2017) 357-372. Andreas Bsteh and Sayed A. Mirdamadi, ed., *Hermeneutik. Thema der 4. Iranisch-Österreichischen Konferenz*, Mödling: Verlag St Gabriel: 2010, accessible at https://se-ktf.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user_upload/p_sozialethik/UEber_Ethik/Leseraum/Christlich-muslimischer_Dialog/Deutsch/IOEK_deutsch/Andreas_Bsteh_4_-_Hermeneutik.pdf (accessed 21/12/19).

are subject to ongoing debates within religions which also take up influences from the outside over time.[28]

As one example, the ethical core question of when it is legitimate to apply violence is to be cited from a biblical perspective and its inner biblical transformations. Its development knew mainly three stages of evolution as paradigmatic models to guide human action. They will be spelt out here in biblical terms, but may be found also in other religious and philosophical traditions. The first stage is represented by a certain Lamech, a son of Cain, the son of Adam. His response to the violence inflicted on him is to exert even greater violence on his enemies as he states, not without pride: "I have killed a man for wounding me, a boy for bruising me. When Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold" (Gen 4:23f). This reaction may seem utterly archaic, but a closer look at political and social realities and even at war theory shows that it is a recurring form of human thought and actions. The practice of excessive violence can give a person or a community an edge over its opponents. Totalitarian regimes killed people to terrorize others of a particular group. Pre-emptive military strikes and disproportionate violence in war are meted out to discourage further resistance and so on. The model of the biblical Lamech as brutal as it is can be found in reality to this day. Regarded from an ethical as well as a social and long-term perspective it proves, however, highly destructive for individuals as well as for societies as a whole, leading into a deadly spiral of ever more excessive violence. This is indicated by the text itself: "When Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold." The second model is the so-called principle of *talion* as it can be found in legal systems — religious or not — throughout history. The biblical formulation is "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (Ex 21:23f et alia). Its aim is reciprocity which is to curtail violence by demanding a strictly proportional response: if one tooth has been hit out *only* one tooth is to be demanded in return.[29] It

[28]There is a wealth of literature on the development of ethics, law and their interpretations in the monotheistic religions, cf. Rémi Brague, *The Law of God. The Philosophical History of an Idea*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 279-387; with regard to Christianity, the development of the central notions of Christian ethics can be found in Wilhelm Korff, Markus Vogt, ed., *Gliederungssysteme angewandter Ethik. Ein Handbuch*, Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 2016; for Judaism, Jonathan Sacks, *Essays on Ethics*, Jerusalem: Maggid Books; for Islam, Abdullah A. An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State. Negotiating the Future of Shari'a*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, on the different legal schools in Islam.

[29]The same ideas existed also in the Western law tradition well before Christianity, cf. Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution. The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition,* Cambridge, and London: Harvard University Press, 1983.

constitutes thus a model of retributive justice that is to limit retribution by making it reciprocal.

The third ethical model with regard to violence puts this form of retributive justice into question, and with it, the violence it necessarily entails. As tempting as pre-emptive strikes might be to paralyze the enemy, and as unavoidable a certain degree of retribution may be to guarantee social peace, the question posed is whether there may not be a possibility to completely refrain from violence which constitutes an evil under all circumstances?[30] How far are humans able to mitigate the destructive consequences of violence by refraining from any counter-violence? The recognition of the desirability of such behaviour is a considerable moral progress as compared to the (un)ethical positions of disproportionate revenge and to proportionate retribution. For the society as a whole, it is advantageous because it helps to keep the level of violence low. That it can also be an effective way to initiate political change, has been shown by the non-violence movements of the 20th century starting with Mahatma Gandhi whose *satyagraha* movement had been inspired by Hindu texts as well as by the Sermon on the Mount of the New Testament (Mt 5-7). It is probably the most prominent example of ethical cross-fertilization between religious traditions. As much as it may be doubted that violence can be avoided at all times, the desirability of non-violence can be comprehended by all humans independent of their religious belief. The insight that violence constitutes a moral evil is just as universal as are the ethical norms in all religions to curb it. This can, and in certain cases indeed will, lead to different ethical positions because of varying cultural traditions and differing assessments of concrete situations. Thus, one may consider humanitarian intervention, e. g. military intervention in case of severe human rights violations, as necessary and legitimate because one cannot imagine another way to stop an aggressor in a particular situation. But violence is no longer considered neutral, or even a good or the inevitable fate of humans, it is rather considered the lesser evil.

These and other ethical questions can and should indeed be reflected in interreligious dialogue, so that the ethical consensus between different religions may grow and the wisdom of other traditions may help to better understand ethical issues. Such dialogues on ethics should be extended to those who do not profess any religion but adhere to a secular-humanist world

[30]This argument can already be found in Plato's *Politeia* (cf. Pol 335b/c).

view.[31] Between secular humanism and religious ethical traditions there also exists also considerable common ground in their aim to better human life and mitigate human suffering. These dialogues will be challenging, last but not least because of politico-religious polarizations, which often leave little room for an ethical debate untouched by ideological premises. There exists, however, at the same time a great deal of ethical cross-fertilization between religious communities and a wealth of initiatives worldwide, for instance so as to better care for refugees, the sick, the dying, and other vulnerable groups. Many of these activities are inspired by similar initiatives in other faith communities or by secular actors. This in itself verifies the main hypothesis of this paper, that ethical convictions, whether founded on religious teachings or not, are not exclusive in nature but inclusive. They can be adopted and imitated by humans across faith traditions through ethical reflection and be integrated in their own world views. The same is obviously not the case with regard to divergent creeds or cult practices.

3. Some Good Reasons for Relaunching Interreligious Dialogue on Ethics

3.1. Plural and Global Contexts: Ethics and Their Political Consequences

Growing pluralism, including religious pluralism, presently constitutes one of the main challenges of societies worldwide. Migration, social mobility and a weakening of traditional lifestyles, as well as religious freedom in many countries make it likely that this process of pluralization will continue and even accelerate. Though pluralism is most pronounced in Western societies, it is also growing elsewhere. In a world becoming more interdependent, religiously homogeneous societies and religiously parallel societies are increasingly a thing of the past. Since moral convictions and a corresponding praxis constitute the basis for social and political peace, there should be an eminent interest in ethical reflection on the norms that are to orient and guide social as well as political life in the emerging multi-cultural and multi-religious societies worldwide. Creating models of interreligious interaction and harmony through dialogue is thus one of the great tasks of the future, the alternative being increasing religious and political tensions, repression and violence, as the rise of diverse fundamentalist movements shows. This asks for the re-interpretation of traditional norms, virtues, and

[31]For the historical development of secular humanism cf. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007, 221-298.

moral examples of religious and secular traditions so as to reflect on non-violent social solutions. There exists, moreover, a wide range of issues where the cooperation of religious communities and the efforts of theological thinkers on ethics would be desirable and where it would be possible for believers of different religions to cooperate in the struggle for the common good: the fight against poverty and ecological degradation, for women's equality and the right to religious freedom, the struggle against human trafficking, and for the humane treatment of migrants and refugees, to name but a few. Religious communities and their leaders can play a central role in combatting these and other global evils in a world that has become a laboratory for competing ideas and values and in which religious beliefs mutually influence each other, consciously as well as unconsciously, for the good or for the bad.[32]

3.2. Encounters and Mutual Learning Experiences: Practical Examples

Experience in interreligious dialogue shows that dialogues on ethics are easier and stir less anxieties with regard to religious identities than dialogues on theological questions. Thereby best practice examples are helpful. In this last section I therefore want to shortly describe three such interreligious dialogues which were particularly stimulating.[33]

The first example to be mentioned are two Conferences on Promoting Female Leadership, which in 2008 and 2010 brought together in Vienna academics from theology and religious studies as well as practitioners. The conferences were organized by the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the academic direction of the Institute of Social Ethics. They showed the fruitfulness of an interreligious exchange between women from all continents and the monotheistic religious traditions. It also became clear that there exist female theologians as well as international and national civil society organisations in all these religious communities who aim at enhancing the equality of women. Another initiative worth mentioning was a large-scale conference launched by the United

[32]A particularly important question is the relationship between law and here again human rights in different faith traditions, cf. Ingeborg Gabriel, "Menschenrechte und Religionen: Verbündete oder Gegner?" in Peter G. Kirchschläger, *Die Verantwortung von nicht-staatlichen Akteuren gegenüber den Menschenrechten*, Religionsrechtliche Studien 4, Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2017, 33-52.

[33]For further practical examples see Julia Ipgrave et alia, *Interreligious Encounter in Urban Community and Education* (Religious Diversity and Education in Europe, Vol. 36), London: Waxman, 2018.

Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in December 2012, which brought together religious leaders, practitioners, and scholars all from faiths in Geneva to discuss effective action for migrants and refugees. The aim was to better understand how religious grassroot networks could contribute to UN efforts to improve the situation of this particularly vulnerable group in today's world more effectively. A third example of a long-term interreligious dialogue on ethics to be mentioned here is the so called Vienna Dialogue Initiative (VDI). It started in the 1980s when the Roman Catholic Church had decided at Vatican II to make interreligious dialogue one of its objectives, an engagement for which the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra aetate* (1965) had laid the basis. At first several conferences were organized, reflecting on Christianity's relationship to Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. They were followed by a series of academic encounters aimed at deepening the mutual understanding of these faith traditions. The theological method was to formulate central questions which the other faith traditions might pose to Christian theology including its ethics and vice versa. The concept thus was dialogical from the very beginning. Anthropological and ethical issues played an important role in these interreligious explorations. The following series of Vienna Christian-Muslim Round Table (VICIRoTa) conferences which took place from 2000 and 2008, biannually brought together a smaller group of scholars, made up equally of men and women from various academic backgrounds. They discussed topics which are central to global ethics from different faith perspectives. The Christian-Islamic Summer University (VICISU), which is held every second year, with mainly Muslim and Christian students from all over the world, still is a follow-up to these interreligious dialogues at the academic level.[34]

They followed a three weeks' programme that centred on ethics and law.[35] The main aim of the VDI in all its phases was to define basic elements of global ethics through interreligious dialogue

Concluding Remarks: A Plea for an Alliance of the Moderates of All Religions

The motto of the German theologian Hans Küng and of the World Parliament of Religions of 1993 was: "No world peace without peace

[34]Most of the publications are available in English, Arabic, Urdu, and partly also in Farsi and can be found online at https://se-ktf.univie.ac.at/forschung/christlich-muslimischer-dialog/. For the story of this interreligious dialogue initiative in detail cf. Ingeborg Gabriel, "Like Rosewater. Reflections on Interreligious Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (winter 2010) 1-23, at 4-10.

[35]See https://www.vicisu.com/ (accessed 21/12/19).

among the religions." This still holds true today even though views on the political engagement of religions have become more complex. Though global as well as local tensions do not only have one cause, religions have become political identity markers in a way that could hardly be foreseen some decades ago fuelling present conflicts. Polarizations within religious communities themselves on the issue of dialogue often make dialogue difficult. In this situation it is imperative that those who want to work for peace engage in interreligious dialogue on ethics as well as the legal basis of nations and of the international community. It would be naïve to think that divisions between religious communities that have existed for hundreds and even thousands of years can be overcome in short periods of time and that such dialogues alone can bring about change. But as this article attempted to show an understanding on norms, rules, and virtues is possible, since these are not religiously exclusive, but rather inclusive with regard to their content. They can and indeed must be debated with regard to their meaningfulness and their consequences for human life, for social peace and peace in general. Present-day global discussions on the practical applications of ethics confirm this. For this it needs effective alliances of moderates from all religions ready to work towards this aim. The fact that there are people in all faith traditions, men and women, who struggle to improve the relationship between different religious communities and to further common action is a sign of hope in today's world. Intellectual efforts can help to strengthen their positions and further the agenda of interreligious dialogue in a globalized world. Peace does not depend on having the same belief in God, but on finding common ethical standards and ground which can be accepted by all as the basis of civil peace.