

DIGNITY OF HUMAN PERSON AND CO-RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE COMMON GOOD

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1. Towards a Right Understanding of the Human Person

“God, give us wisdom as a father gives wisdom to his sons.

May we live and have light.” (Rig Veda 7,32,26)

By 2020 India will have the biggest working force in the world: young, gifted, dynamic, and energetic. If they will be creative, well-motivated, and forward-looking, there is no limit to what they will be able to achieve for the nation and contribute to the world. If, on the contrary, they happen to be disoriented, divided, unmotivated, unemployed and unemployable, they will be potential revolutionaries, insurgents, and radicals of every sort. If they will not be able to cohere together and agree on basic values in keeping with human dignity, society will be heading for major troubles. We are already beginning to experience some of them. With the rise of new economic possibilities we also notice weakening of accountability and serious damage to the environment. These are times for a deeper reflection.

In this period of fast changes, radical ideologies of the Right or of the Left can lead people who feel aggrieved to extreme positions, and there can be violent reactions in response. In such a climate of strong ideologies, explosive self-expressions become more and more acceptable, and normal. Even a society like ours that used to place high ideals before itself can lose self-control and move in the direction of communal violence, unrestrained forms of protests, Machiavellian style of state-functioning, sharkish methods in the market place, and hedonistic consumerism in private life. This is a moment in which we need to propose a radical choice for life, ethical values, an attitude of co-responsibility, self-imposed limits to the overuse of natural resources, and the protection of the environment. We need to build up an ethical sturdiness based on the right understanding of the human person in order to take on these and similar challenges that lie ahead. Our inner self needs to be awakened and a sense of responsibility aroused.

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2. A Call to Work Together in the Service of Humanity

“It is with united effort that good deeds can be done.” (Atharva Veda 20,128,12)

Benedict XVI recently encouraged “working together in the service of humanity, especially in defending the dignity of the human person, in affirming fundamental ethical values, in promoting justice and peace, and in responding to the suffering”¹ and ensuring the equitable distribution of resources and safeguarding of creation. In a few words, he summarized some of the greatest challenges of our times. It has become the duty of persons from different cultural and religious traditions to come together in a common effort to take up these burning issues and contribute unitedly towards building up a better world. In discussing these diverse human concerns, we must emphasize that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of all human rights and obligations (civic rights, and ethical, social and environmental obligations).

3. The Dignity of the Human Person

“The Lord dwelleth in the hearts of all beings.” (Gita XVIII, 61)

Dignity of the human person derives from:

- i) human *nature*
- ii) the responsible *role* human beings plays in the Universe
- iii) the greatness of the *destiny* to which human beings are called.

Nearly all traditions agree that in the human being, with the intellectual powers, the cosmic order touches a high point. He/she is the epitome of all that has come into existence. He/she is a veritable microcosm, identifying him/herself with the whole of existing reality.

At the same time, the human being is a paradox; though bound to the earth by the bodily nature with all its limitations, he/she transcends the earth because he/she can think, speak, communicate, acquire knowledge, play a responsible role, make free moral choices and realize his/her destiny. He/she is the meeting place of both (body-spirit, time-eternity). Those who accept evolution see the Universe becoming conscious of itself in the human being. St. Thomas Aquinas held human beings as the fulfilment of the entire cosmos.²

¹Benedict XVI, “World Day of Peace,” 1.1.2011, no. 12.

²Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3.78.

4. A Christian Understanding of the Human Person, His/Her Dignity

“When God created human beings, He made them like himself.”
(Genesis 5:1)

Christian belief in this regard may be phrased in this manner briefly:

- i) God created human beings in His own image and likeness (nature)
- ii) he/she is the steward of all of creation (role)
- iii) he/she is called to eternal happiness with God Himself (destiny).

Human beings originate from God (not through emanation, but creation); they are destined to return to Him (not for dissolution, but fellowship).

God created human beings in His own image and likeness (Gen 1:26-27; 5:1; Gen 9:5-6). He made them spiritual personalities, embodied spirits, conversation partners. He reaches out to them with His message of love, and expects a response in similar fashion. In fact, He has made them His very own children (John 1:12; Romans 8:17). By giving them the capacity to make free choices (capacity for self-determination), He invites them to play a responsible role in ordering their own life and the potentialities of other creatures towards their destiny. The psalmist says, “You made him inferior only to yourself; you crowned him with glory and honour. You appointed him ruler of everything you made; you placed him over all creation” (Psalms 8:5-6). The human beings are called to intimate fellowship with Him and are destined for His company. They become truly human when they tend to God and serve divine purpose.

The Catholic Church always upheld human dignity. In *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII says: “Justice demands that the dignity of human personality be respected in them (workers)” (n. 31). They have a right to a meaningful job. “No one may with impunity outrage the dignity of man, which God himself treats with great reverence...” (n. 57).

Pope John XXIII in his *Mater et Magistra* speaks of the right to health services, education, training, housing, labour, leisure, recreation (n. 61). His *Pacem in Terris* speaks of the lofty dignity of the human person which implies rights and duties (n. 9-10). It emphasizes the social character of human dignity.

Pope Paul VI in his *Populorum Progressio* speaks of the Church’s commitment to human dignity.

Pope John Paul II, in *Laborem Exercens*, affirms that human dignity is linked to his transcendent destiny. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* shows how the human person is at the centre of all social, economic and political concerns of society. In *Centesimus Annus*, he refers to the ‘transcendent dignity’ of the human person.

Gaudium et Spes quotes the Psalms 8:5-6 referring to the greatness of the human being. “Thou hast made him a little less than the angels, thou hast crowned him with glory and honour: thou hast set him over the works of thy hands, thou hast subjected all things under his feet” (n. 12).

5. Human Failure, Redemption through Christ

“What is man that you are mindful of him?

What is this strange mystery about my nature?

I am great and small, high and low, mortal and immortal, of earth and of heaven, I must be buried with Christ and rise with him again, be co-heir with Christ, become a son of God and indeed God himself.” (St Gregory Nazianzen, *Or 7, 23*)

Ecologists may find the above description of the human being too anthropocentric and triumphalistic. Our aim is not to exalt the human being, but discover his rightful role in the overall destiny of the Universe. We Christians admit that everything has not been well with humankind. He has been inwardly damaged through his own failure (sin). He stood in need of the spiritual restoration (redemption) that Christ accomplished through his saving work and the gift of his Life. But healed and restored the human being can fulfil his mission on earth as a co-worker with his Creator, caring for creation as a diligent steward, and leading things to their destiny through his own personal effort, inner renewal and uprightness of life (2 Corinthians 4:16; Romans 7:22; Ephesians 3:16).

6. Towards a Sense of Moral Responsibility

For this, the human being must make himself equal to the task, healing and transforming whatever is not right in his personal life, in the social order, and in the created Universe, to the extent that is possible for him. For, woundedness remains in him still, in society and in the cosmic order. The dignity of the human person reveals itself most of all in contributing of his own free choice to the re-ordering of all things towards their destiny in God.

This challenge of making the right choice with a sense of responsibility opens up the entire realm of ethics and morality, the mission of humanizing the world and filling every sphere of activity (work, technology, art) with the spirit. In so doing he develops nature and himself. The limitations in the world that we notice show, not that it is a reality in ruins, but that it is rich in potentiality to be realized partly by its internal dynamisms and partly by man’s rational action. Thus, creation itself benefits from Christ’s saving work: “All of creation waits with eager longing for God” (Romans 8:19-21). And humans contribute to this cause.

Every human action is relevant to ordering things to their destiny. Meanwhile he himself grows in grace and fullness.

Dignity of the human person confers dignity on things that are related to him/her. So we speak of the dignity of marriage, dignity of work, dignity of human endeavour, the values of human culture; the dignity of family life, the dignity of the child, the dignity of the dying destitute.

7. Relevance of These Apparently Abstract Concepts

“God has created a natural distrust for falsehood and trust for truth.” (Yajur Veda 16,77)

These words about human destiny with reference to God may sound like a list of irrelevant philosophical statements and pious thoughts to persons who have a pragmatic outlook. But when one reads of the tragedies of the Holocaust, Hiroshima, Gulag archipelago, Mao’s Cultural Revolution and Pol Pot’s ‘killing fields’, we realize how each person acts according to his framework of thought (ideology or foundational beliefs). If it corresponds to truth and reality, his contribution will be constructive and useful; if, on the contrary imbalanced, utopian or aggressive, the results will be bound to be disastrous. Right notions, then, are important.

Even as of now, can we claim that we are handling social issues of the day in a manner in keeping with the dignity of the human person: e.g. Human Rights, treatment of religious minorities, religious freedom, rights of smaller ethnic groups, care for the marginalized, expression of dissent, use of force, differences of opinion, or politics of protests? We are living in the midst of a situation that tolerate the widening gap between the rich and the poor, caste discrimination, corruption in an outrageously conspicuous fashion, political protests, and bomb blasts. At global level, we are faced with the reality of the violence of the strong against the weak, and the violence of the weak in response. How far are we able to bring an awareness of the Dignity of Person and value of human lives in such contexts?

8. Human Brokenness and Potentiality

If expediency is law (Macchiavelli), might becomes right (Hobbes). Christian convictions recoil before such proposals. If humanity seeks to work out solutions all on its own independently of moral law and divine precepts, we are sure to stumble. Distancing oneself from God in a proud claim of autonomy and ignoring His life-enhancing design, the human being falls into a helpless state (as history has repeatedly shown), and life becomes too hard to bear. He may feel as though he is a ‘being unto death’ (Heidegger) or an absurd object (Sartre). Such feelings of despair in the

mouths of ‘existentialist philosophers’ sounded exaggerated, but such voices gave evidence to the agony of the human situation and the humbling experience of one’s inherent fragilities.

Christians recognize this fragility and this inner brokenness. For sure, the human being is not a Superman (Nietzsche); nor is he merely a form of organized matter (Marx). He remains a child of God despite his human frailties (John 1:12) and keeps struggling towards his destiny (2 Corinthians 10:3; Philippians 1:27), which is to become sharers in His divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). Indians readily agrees with the words of Jesus like “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30), or “The Father is in me and I am in the Father” (John 10:38), “I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (John 14:11). “When that day comes, you will know that I am in my Father and that you are in me, just as I am in you” (John 14:20). The close relationship of the personal ‘self’ with the Ultimate Self is a theme that stands at the heart of all the main Indian traditions.

Human beings then are a supreme value. All other things are only means contributing to the human person’s development, whether they be capital, science, or industry. Consequently they are not value-free or neutral. In tomorrow’s society, the human factor becomes even more central; it will not be capital and material resources that will decide the future but the ‘human capital’. Because of this, human beings must also become humane, combining self-interest with altruism, self-assertion with solidarity and generosity.

9. One Will Have to Pay the Price for Irresponsibility

If, on the contrary, the human being is no more than accident in nature as some thinkers have proposed (a ‘casino view’ of reality), everything becomes different. Whatever suits one is valid and legitimate. If the sole moral principle is one’s own convenience (pleasure, personal fulfilment, hunger for status, for power or the accumulation of wealth), the door opens fully for an ethic of selfishness and greed and ardent consumerism. Today, with the possibility for abundance within reach, not a few seem to be eager to go even beyond what the traditional Utilitarians dreamt of (Bentham, Mill, Locke, and Hume): everything that is possible or fanciful is legitimate.

Irresponsibility has consequences. World history shows that even the most advanced nations and most glamorous civilizations paid the price for handling their success irresponsibly. They worked their way to exhaustion and decline when the leadership lacked responsibility and society played

politics and economics without a moral vision. It may be happening even in our own days. It remains a warning for us. Efficiency and GDP without human concern for each other and for the more fragile communities, commercial exchange without proportionate advantage to the weaker partner, hidden dishonesty and violence without a sense of guilt, flexibility of principles that amounts to relativization of truths and values.

We will need to do a lot of soul-searching to evaluate how our society handles its assets built on the temporary advantage of cheap labour. Will these hard-won resources be wasted on self-flattering ventures: in projects of display, arms race, out-of-proportion space projects, while neglecting social welfare programmes in aid of the poorer sections of the people, like drinking water, literacy, health care, malaria eradication programmes, assistance to women and children, modest housing, environment protection? When we become insensitive to the needs and dignity of others as human persons, it will not take us a long time before we lower ourselves to less than human levels, descending from the rational to the sensual, then to the monstrous: degradation of the human body, addiction to excesses of drugs and alcohol, insensitive abortion, experimenting with the human embryos and manipulating human heredity.

10. Measuring Advantages against Consequences

“The true seems often false, the false seems true; appearances deceive, so think it through.” (Panchatantra)

If, in such sensitive areas, Christian convictions stand in favour of life, balance, respect, moderation, responsibility and human dignity, it is not resistance to new ideas, it is rather a sign of their commitment to human dignity, people’s welfare, and values that assure a future to humanity. Promoters of technological research should accept responsibility for the consequences of their proposals when they are on the verge of being reckless. There is something like ‘preventive ethics’ when it comes to experimentation (atomic technology and gene technology). Those who make their voices of caution heard in such situations are doing a service to society. Those who command communication networks, stock markets, genetic engineering, and national planning need to hear messages eliciting a deep sense of responsibility. Profit-making strategies can be acceptable only if they are ethically sound, socially sensitive, and ecologically alert.

11. Rights of Human Beings

It is in this context that we study the rights of human beings. A person’s rights are not primarily concerned about profit, property, or exchange, but

about his dignity; about the person and not about his goods. They are about a person's moral claim for attaining what is legitimate to him. Historically, rights became important in the context of the absolute power claimed by the government (state, king, elected government, dictator), or theories like might is right. Among rights may be mentioned: the right to life; the freedom of conscience and religion, the freedom to choose religion; freedom of expression and action, freedom of press, assembly, association; the freedom to work towards his final end according to his own convictions; to follow his vocation, to educate his children; right to sufficient material wealth for a proper domestic life; right to employment, private possessions; right to work, good name, education, information; to spiritual and cultural development, good government; equality before law.

It is important to remember that the claim of justice and rights by the individual does not end with himself/herself as the final goal. Justice must ultimately place itself at the service of the community, which means at the service of love. Justice often seeks to give the minimum, while love strains itself to offer the maximum. Love responds to the actual needs of the individual and the community, and even goes beyond, suspending one's own rights. Love is a supreme law.

12. A Search for Ethical Choices

Both rights and duties need to combine in the right manner to promote the common welfare of the human person. It is for this reason that the ability to make choices that are ethical and life-enhancing has become the most pressing need of the day. We have to learn to work out some sort of consensus, too, in order to join hands together with others of various persuasions in a common endeavour. In crisis we know how to do that. For example, on occasions of great tragedies like that of the Tsunami or the destruction of the Twin towers, people sank their differences and reflected more profoundly on the serious dimensions of their human identity: the preciousness of human life, the meaning of human existence on earth, a shared responsibility in working out our common destiny. Is it possible to ask similar questions in more normal times as well?

The lives lost at the Twin Towers were not more precious than those lost in bomb blasts in London, Madrid or Bali; those lost in revolutionary movements in Russia, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Germany or Hungary; in ethnic conflicts in the Balkans; in the war and violence in Iraq or Afghanistan; in communal conflicts, farmers' suicides, dowry deaths, hasty abortions, or female infanticide. Why do we not try to do something

about coming to aid of the weak and helpless in such contexts? Why do we fail to work out a consensus to address such daunting problems?

When Mother Teresa came to the rescue of the man dying alone in the streets and the newborn child in the dump-heap, what she was saying was precisely that they were human persons even at the moment of their utmost wretchedness and deserved our love, respect and care. It was Christian belief in the dignity of the human person translated into life. She was showing that religion gives a depth dimension to the human search for solutions to the most intractable social problems, that it can evoke generosity and commitment with an unconditionality and absoluteness and that nothing else can, and that it promotes supreme values most cherished by humans. This shows that it is the exaggerated claims of ‘modernity’ which sought to humiliate religion that are suffering ‘devaluation’ today, not religion itself (Jurgen Habermas).

13. The Difficulty of Reaching a Consensus in a Multicultural Society

Due to global commerce, mass migration and travelling habits of people, and the expanding reach of the communications network, we are compelled to live in a culturally and religiously pluralistic society in almost every part of the world. In this context, how do we join hands with neighbours of other beliefs in defending human dignity and in handling problems in society, like growing violence, crime, dishonesty, AIDS, drugs? On what terms do we come together with people who have another understanding of what is right, good, polite, dignified, beautiful or appropriate? Are there ways of transcending inter-community misunderstandings and tensions, basing ourselves on the values still surviving in communities rescued from various civilizational traditions? Will a few more self-help books and personality development courses suffice? Or, will better self-presentation, winning manners, and improved norms of civility serve the purpose? Or do we need go deeper and accept the truth that certain things are conducive to social growth and certain things are not, that there are things that are right that need to be done and there are things that are wrong that ought not to be done in view of the common good?

14. An Inclination of the Heart

“May I never be guilty of an impious act.” (Atharva Veda 5,3,4)
No doubt, there is a certain amount of pessimism in the air in a fast emerging pluralistic world. The feeling is that philosophers and saints have devoted lifetimes to study and debate without resolving the issue of a

universal human ethics.³ This is one of the problems with which the Indian mind had wrestled for centuries. In the ancient epic *Mahabharata* we meet with characters who, unlike the Greek heroes, discuss the morality of war even in the midst of the battle. Bhishma, the wise man, finally concludes, “*Dharma* (uprightness) is subtle.”⁴ Yudhishtira keeps questioning *dharma* till the very end of the story.⁵

Despite such evident difficulties when things go wrong or argument takes the wrong direction, we realize that people in different eras and civilizations have always thought that there are some things ethically right and socially becoming, while others are not. They felt convinced that there was a natural desire in human hearts to do what is right. The great Indian poet Kalidasa referred to the ‘inclination of the heart of a good person’ as a reliable guide in such matters.⁶ Manu, the Indian lawgiver, thought that satisfaction of the mind was one important criterion for evaluating moral choices.⁷ However, moral guidance cannot be a dictate from the world of emotions; it should be binding, but at the same time liberating and empowering. For, even hard-core capitalists, who seem to be totally indifferent to spiritual realities, feel the need for the protection of law and the mutuality of contracts in order to continue their business.⁸ Everyone is going to benefit from shared ethical principles.

15. Collaboration across Cultures, Traditions and Religions

“Be united; speak in harmony; let your minds apprehend alike; common be your prayer; common be the end of your assembly; common be your resolutions; common be your deliberations; unified be your hearts; common be your intentions; perfect be your unity.” (Rig Veda 10,191,24)

In this area there is an urgent need for collaborating across cultures and religious traditions. If Martin Luther King, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Thich Nhat Hanh could join hands together in Civil Rights and Peace initiatives, people of different beliefs and identities can share the common ethic of human dignity, human rights, and human liberation. All they have to do is to accept and respect the core ethical values common to different

³John Dalla Costa, *The Ethical Imperative*, Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1998, xii.

⁴Gurucharan Das, *The Difficulty of Being Good*, New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2009, 46.

⁵Das, *The Difficulty of Being Good*, 281.

⁶Das, *The Difficulty of Being Good*, 48.

⁷Das, *The Difficulty of Being Good*, 48.

⁸Dalla Costa, *The Ethical Imperative*, 5.

traditions which are to be found in various forms within various cultural heritages. People who believe in dialogue and collaboration will want to work together with people of other faiths continually following commonly accepted principles. When they work closely with them, they notice that there is wide common ground that can be shared, and that people are willing to widen it further. In recent years inter-religious conversations have assisted mutual understanding, helped to resolve problems and generated a desire for the development of an interfaith ethic.

Certainly there are some broad principles that would find ready acceptance anywhere in the world. For example, Dhammapada taught: “to avoid evil, to cultivate good, and to purify one’s mind” (verse 183). Buddha’s ‘Middle Way’ suggested living a sane, moderate and balanced life. People everywhere have valued: good judgement, friendship, loyalty, compassion, gratitude, generosity, sympathy, family affection, and the most important principle that one should never use others as a means. People of every ethnic group, political affiliation, rank or position are open to rational truths, welcome dignified codes of conduct, and retain optimism about the wisdom of the world community concerning the common good.

Even societies considered most ‘primitive’ have the idea of right, wrong, evil, duty, and justice. They treasure social values and approve of reasonable and dignified behaviour among its members. They consider the approval of society very important. They have profound convictions about honesty, reciprocity, and sharing. They generally follow monogamy and have faith in one Supreme God. Often there is no difference between primitive and civilized societies in basic matters of ethics. The simplest hunters have already developed a full-fledged moral system. This leaves no room for relativism. Universal values are absolutes.

16. Collective Responsibility for Persuading Each Other

“Learn thou this by discipleship, by investigation and by service.

The wise seers of the essence of things will instruct thee in wisdom.”

(Bhagavad Gita IV,34)

Convergences in moral perceptions are becoming evident across cultures, religions, ranks and positions.⁹ However, if the global ethic proposed by a

⁹Pope Benedict XVI wrote: “Politics and diplomacy should look to the *moral and spiritual patrimony* offered by the great religions of the world in order to acknowledge and affirm universal truths, principles and values which cannot be denied without denying the dignity of the human person... It means acting in a responsible way on the basis of an objective and integral knowledge of the facts; it means

dominant community in a country is ethno-centric and self-serving, it will surely be resisted by other communities. In the same way, a vague pluralism or crass pragmatism that leads to relativism in religious faith, morality, and values, would be unacceptable. If, on the contrary, the ethical principles proposed assist people to find a common moral ground for daily living, most people would be happy to profit from them.¹⁰

In order to achieve that, we ought to bring sincerity to our moral search and combine an intuitive moral sensibility and ethical alertness to the pluralistic situation in which we have to live. What seems to be missing today, however, is a readiness on the part of many to take collective responsibility for persuading each other to accept at least some broad ethical norms for the common good.

Pope Benedict XVI says: "... new generations can build on the knowledge and experiences of those who went before, and they can draw upon the moral treasury of the whole of humanity" (*Spe Salvi* 24). If anyone seeks to lead a community to what is good refers to their religious and cultural traditions, their wise men and their sacred writings, his words will have greater convincing power. When we want to evoke the good will of any person or a community, the most intelligent thing to do is to consult the collective psyches and consciences of those communities and profit from the values cherished in their cultures and civilizations. It is our eagerness to tap the common ethical resources of humankind for the common good; for, they belong to the whole of humanity.

17. Closeness in Ethical Convictions

"Listen, and I will teach you what wise men have said.

Study their teachings, and you will be glad if you remember them and can quote them." (Proverbs 22:17)

In this section, I would like to refer to some of the themes in which the Catholic and Hindu perspectives specially agree: spiritual search, religious depth, renunciation, austerity, monasticism, purity, simplicity, silence. Out of many others, I have identified three areas for special reflection: 1) Love

deconstructing political ideologies which end up supplanting truth and human dignity in order to promote pseudo-values under the pretext of peace, development and human rights; it means fostering an unswerving commitment to base positive law on the principles of natural law" (Benedict XVI, "World Day of Peace," 1.1.2011, n.12).

¹⁰William Schweiker, *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*, Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2008, 135.

and Co-belonging, 2) Honesty and Truthfulness, and 3) Respect for Life, Nature, and Environment.

17.1. Love and Co-Belonging

Love for others stands at the heart of all ethical codes. Every culture has some way of saying that we ought to do to others what we would like others to do to us. This is a powerful message in an age of intense cultivation of self-interest and absolute commitment to profit-making.

We love each other because we are convinced that we belong to each other. Affirmation of community loyalty runs right through much of Asian literature. “Meet together, speak together, let your minds be of one accord... May your counsel be common, your assembly common, common the mind, and the thoughts... Let your aims be common, and your hearts be of one accord, and all of you of one mind, so you may live well together” (*Rig Veda* 10.191.2-4). Irrespective of caste and creed, the following virtues are held in high regard: patience, liberality, self-control, nonviolence, sympathy, freedom from anger. Ahimsa means much more than nonviolence; it stands for abstention from causing injury to any living being and inconveniencing any person in any manner. People like Mahatma Gandhi and Tagore, spoke for the human race as one, as did Buddha, Asoka and others in their times.

Togetherness and harmony are strongly urged “Let us have concord with our own people, and concord with people who are strangers to us... May we unite in our minds, unite in our purposes, and not fight against the divine spirit within us” (*Atharva Veda* 7.52.1-2). How similar are these sentiments to what the psalmist says, “How wonderful it is, how pleasant, for God’s people to live together in harmony!” (Psalms 133:1). There are many other virtues of common interest. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna teaches:

Fearlessness, purity, determination in the discipline of knowledge, charity, self-control, sacrifice, study of sacred lore, penance, honesty; nonviolence, truth, absence of anger, disengagement, peace, loyalty, compassion for creatures, lack of greed, gentleness, modesty, reliability; brilliance, patience, resolve, charity, absence of envy and of pride; these characterize a man born of divine traits (16:1.4).

For Christians, love is central. Leviticus 19:18 said, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” Jesus taught: “Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do to them” (Matthew 7:12). He insisted we must go beyond what is due, even beyond what the other person expects from us. “When a man takes your coat, let him have your shirt as well” (Luke 6:29). He tells us not to entertain harsh thought, not to use a hard word; to take the initiative for

reconciliation even in cases when it is the other person who has taken the initiative for quarrel (Matthew 5:22-23). He proposes that we invite the unjust aggressor to do even more injustice to us, offering him the other cheek (Matthew 5:39). And after that Jesus asks us to love him, and continue to love him still when he continues to harass and persecute us, since God himself loves him (Matthew 5:44). This is a teaching that Mahatma Gandhi tried to take into the political field. This is not free license given to the rest of society to exploit the Christian believer. It is, on the contrary, God's own personal invitation given for heroic love.

Care for the poor is a central message in most civilizations:

When you harvest your fields, do not cut the corn at the edges of the fields, and do not go back to cut the ears of corn that were left. Do not go back through your vineyard to gather grapes that were missed or to pick up the grapes that have fallen; leave them for poor people and foreigners (Leviticus 19:9-10).

Exodus teaches: "You shall not murder, You shall not steal" (20:13). According to Leviticus "You shall not defraud your fellow beings. You shall not commit robbery" (19:13). When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him (Leviticus 19:33). The wages of a labourer shall not remain with you until morning (Leviticus 19:13). "Cease to do evil. Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice. Aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan. Defend the cause of the widow" (Isaiah 1:17).

17.2. Honesty and Truthfulness

The book of Leviticus says, "Do not cheat anyone by using false measures of length, weight or quantity. Use honest scales, honest weights, and honest measures" (19:35-36). In an era when corruption is moving into the highest places – governments, bureaucracies, legislatures, judiciary, law-enforcing machinery, pollution-controlling agencies, customs departments, immigration offices, official and open markets – the above message from Leviticus is most relevant. Fake goods of every kind are on sale; duplicate goods of every variety are available: books, DVDs, imitation machinery with substandard parts; adulterated medicines, spurious drugs; endangered species, fragile human beings (women for sex, children for sweatshops), human corpses, live organs (like kidneys) for transplant; even machine guns, and rocket launchers! Whatever can be copied or imitated is available. "Do not cheat anyone by using false measures of length, weight or quantity. Use honest scales, honest weights, and honest measures" (Leviticus 19:35-36).

Centuries ago the Upanishads had taught "Truth alone triumphs and not untruth" (*Mundaka Upanishads* III,1,6). Kabir used to say: "Better to be

cheated than cheat others.” And Vivekananda taught: “Society must be moulded by truth.” It is a great mission today to work for probity in public life.

The globalized world provides the anonymity and distances that illegal traffickers need to keep their business invisible. Internet contacts have furthered their possibilities. The deregulation policy that most governments have adopted has weakened the law-enforcing machinery, and illicit traders keep hopping between jurisdictions. International terrorism follows the track of international illicit trade, using the same techniques and facilities. Those who deal in illegal arms keep backing regular criminals, terrorists, urban rioters, political protesters, communal radicals, and secessionists.

17.3. Respect for Life, Nature, and Environment

Reverence for life at every stage of its development is a theme that runs right through the heart of every Asian tradition. Nonviolence constitutes a core value in Hindu tradition. The Asian soul instinctively recoils before abortion, euthanasia, excessive tampering with nature in human re-production, violence to animal and vegetative life.

For the Vedic Aryans, nature was the symbol of the divine: sun, wind, ocean, earth, soil, mountains, forests, springs, etc.

O Mother Earth! Sacred are thy hills, snowy mountains, and deep forests. Be kind to us and bestow upon us happiness. May you be fertile, arable, and nourisher of all. May you continue supporting people of all races and nations. May you protect us from your anger (natural disasters). And may no one exploit and subjugate your children (*Atharva Veda* 12.1.11).

The farmer prays fervently that the hurt he inflicts on nature may speedily be healed. “Whatever I dig up of you, O earth, may you of that have quick replenishment” (*Atharva Veda* 12, 1.64). “The earth is the mother, and I the son of the earth” (*Atharva Veda* 12.12). “What, O earth, I dig out of thee, quickly shall that grow again: may I not, O pure one, pierce thy vital spot, and not thy heart” (*Atharva Veda* 12.35).

The *Yajnavalkyasmṛiti* says, “If any man has cut a tree, a thicket, a creeper or a shrub, he should recite one hundred Vedic verses. If a man is guilty of recklessly cutting a medicinal plant, he should subsist on milk for one day” (2.276). Herbal medicines were very popular. “The earth is a garden, the Lord its gardener, cherishing all, none neglected” (Sikhism, *Adi Granth, Majh Ashtpadi*, 1, M.3, p 118).

We can never forget that *Buddha* was enlightened under a tree. Wise men in India those days retired to the forest in order to meditate. The

Himalayas were a sacred destination. Asia's ancient educational centres were *Ashrams* which were always located on the margins of forests. *Tagore's Shantiniketan* sought to recapture this spirit of closeness to nature. For him, trees were prayers and they spoke about God. "Silence, my soul," he wrote in *Gitanjali*, "these trees are my prayers." And he went on, "I asked the tree, speak to me about God, and it blossomed." The Psalmist expresses similar sentiments in many places. He invites the trees of the forest to shout for joy (Psalm 96:12).

It is good to remember that "The world and all that is in it belong to the Lord; the earth and all who live on it are his" (Psalm 24:1), and that we need to take care of vegetation. Wait for a period of time before you eat fruits from the tree you have planted; Leviticus 19:23-25 said, "When you come into the land of Canaan and plant any kind of fruit tree...in the fifth year you may eat the fruit. If you do this, your trees will bear more fruit."

18. Religiosity, the Sense of the Sacred

"My prayer is that our fellowship with you as believers will bring about a deeper understanding of every blessing which we have in our life in union with Christ." (Philemon 6)

Amazingly, when many of the developed parts of the world have been fast secularizing, Indians as a whole have fiercely held on to their faiths. This religious seriousness is to be considered a common spiritual asset, not only for Indians, but for the whole of humanity. People who have the future of the human race in their minds wish to strengthen it further. Z. Sardar affirms that the gulf between the radical secularism in some regions of the world and the religiosity in other regions is glaringly great. The emphasis on 'rights' needs a foundation, which in the east is provided by religion. He proposes in these postmodern times a return to tradition, meaning an effort for 'sustaining the values and axioms of a civilization.'¹¹

India's heroes have always been people with spiritual depth (Buddha, Mahatma Gandhi, Tagore, Dalai Lama, Mother Teresa), not conquerors, millionaires or sportsmen. Indians admire genuine intellectuals, not mere rationalists. They willingly listen to persons who have had a religious intuition and speak with spiritual unction, and who are not merely sectarian or parochially minded zealots. Many love to read Christian books of some spiritual seriousness: the Bible, the Gospels, the Imitation Christ, Confessions of St. Augustine, the writings St. Teresa of Avila and St. John

¹¹Z. Sardar, *Postmodernism and the Other: The New Imperialism of Western Culture*, London: Pluto, 1998

of the Cross. Leaders who are intellectually bent, eager to share knowledge, and are inclined to contemplation, reflection, mysticism and renunciation, always earn the respect of Asians and win a hearing.

Indians have amazingly retained a great Sense of the Sacred. It is a precious value in a rapidly secularizing world to be preserved and fostered. They respect religious persons, gladly take part in religious events, make religious journeys (pilgrimages), keep reciting sacred words. Those words are considered eternal.¹² Indians hold in reverence everything that is symbolic of the divine: sacred places, sacred words, rituals, chants, practices, traditions, objects, teachings, laws, and values. When we play with religious traditions or trivialize sacred symbolisms, we go directly against the religious instincts of the Indians. Indians value silence, renunciation, and a message given with profound conviction. Detachment is considered a sign of genuineness.

19. Models Inspire, Prove Possibility of Imitation

“So you must follow the example of good men and live a righteous life.” (Proverbs 2:20)

We have referred to several religious texts. They alone may not carry conviction in isolation. They must be put in relationship to human wisdom as understood in different cultures. They must also be counterchecked with the criteria that are widely considered valid in our times. When many approaches combine, the central message about ethical norms goes through and makes an appeal. In this way cooperation in the area of ethical reflection becomes possible, while maintaining at the same time each one his/her own identity. Asians are more open to learn from metaphors than syllogisms, living models than logical arguments, especially in the spiritual field. They look with admiration at inspiring precedents even in different traditions. The figures of persons like Mother Teresa or John Paul II touched the hearts of people much more than apologetics in self-defence or efforts in self-advertisement. They were models of self-giving and egolessness, and exemplified a flaming spirit. Thus they emerged as persuasive agents of social change and common wellbeing.

Pragmatic people think that persons of high moral calibre hold up unrealistic ideals before others and that these ideals do not correspond to the way that the real world works. They believe in what is called *realpolitik*. But men like Dag Hammarskjold, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin

¹²Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, *The Culture of India*, Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Institute of Culture, 1982, 299.

Luther King, Lech Walesa, Vaclav Havel, Albert Luthuli, Alexander Solzhenytsin, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Aung San Kyi did not seem to be unrealistic in their approach to the mighty problems they had in hand. They finally achieved what they set out to do, because they brought their idealism to actual human levels. People who believe in dialogue are eager to share the lived experience of such heroic people.

20. Loss of the Sense of Being Human

“Foundations once destroyed, what can the just do?” (Psalms 11:3)

We need prophetic persons who have the ability to take in hand the problems that confront us today. For, not only are religions in crisis, but also cultures and civilizations, including the present day’s secular civilization itself. The following are some questions that come to our mind in this critical situation. What happens to humanity when, too many of us, having rejected religion as an illusion, have become passive consumers of other types of illusions? What happens when we suffer not only from a loss of religious faith, but even from a sense of being human? What happens when materialism replaces social health, and the home values of cooperation, kindness, and hospitality are not handed on to the next generation?

There was a time when companies and governments used to leave ethics and human refinement to families, teachers, Churches, community and religious leaders. But today nothing like that happens any more. There is less of ethical content in teaching, less of traditional values in the handing on of heritages, and we forget that our duty to love our neighbour includes also our obligation to ‘love our children and grandchildren as we love ourselves’. And we forget that this love is expressed not by being concerned about non-renewable resources only, but also about the transmission of the gains of culture and civilization.¹³ Modernity has promoted justice not moral values. It is evident that claims for human rights alone do not exhaust the comprehensive requirements of morality.

21. We Need People Who Can Persuade Others of Values

*“Your speech should always be pleasant and interesting,
and you should know how to give the right answer to everyone.”*

(Colossians 4:6)

In a culture dominated by ‘market totalitarianism,’ citizens are selling off their personal dignity for a small pay-raise and disposing off their most valued cultural heritage for trivialities which they think add to their

¹³Schweiker, *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*, 515.

comfort. People are blinded by the brilliant performance of some financial wizard, to whom gradually everything becomes legitimate. It gives the impression that there is no law beyond economic success, which has emerged as the ‘supreme good’ amidst human goals and final law among moral principles.

But we do not despair: “Made up of history and experience, memory and expectation, cultures have their resiliency...”¹⁴ Anthropologists tell us that cultural traditions play a greater role in our life than even beliefs. It is interesting to note that Japan and China are taking enormous pains to ensure civilizational continuity while modernizing themselves. India may have a few lessons to learn. It is in this area of reverence for one’s civilization and cultural promotion that believers in dialogue can make a significant contribution. They can join hands together for preserving what is best in their own respective cultural heritages. In so doing, they are in fact assisting to rescue some of the central values common to humanity. The world is looking for persons invested with moral authority and social commitment to help, those who know how to persuade others to do what is right. What they ask is simple: accept what is true and good.

22. Christ Is the Archetype

“And the secret is that Christ is in you...

With all possible wisdom we warn and teach them in order to bring each one into God’s presence as a mature individual in union with Christ.

To get this done I toil and struggle, using the mighty strength which Christ supplies and which is at work in me.” (Col 1:27-29)

Yudhishtira, the hero of the Indian epic ‘Mahabharata’, says: “it is not reason alone that points to upright behaviour (*dharma*) nor holy sayings; *dharma* rather is hidden in a cave,”¹⁵ the cave of one’s heart. Deep religiosity that one cultivates in one’s heart generates principles and values that enrich the ethos of a people. It speaks directly to the conscience and mind of a community, calls for moral transformation, encourages the practice of virtues, as members of a loving human family.¹⁶

In reality, however, the right ethical choice each time proves to be a difficult challenge. Even with the best of good will a constant struggle goes on between the outer man (tendency to evil) and the inner man (tendency to virtue). This struggle is reflected in the ‘Bhagavadgita’

¹⁴Dalla Costa, *The Ethical Imperative*, 220.

¹⁵Dalla Costa, *The Ethical Imperative*, xliii.

¹⁶Benedict XVI, *World Day of Peace*, 1.1.2011, n.9.

dialogue. It is the main theme of Gurucharan Das's *The Difficulty of Being Good*. The discussion about this inner struggle is central to many traditions. Apostle Paul describes it in his letter to the Romans:

For even though the desire to do good is in me, I am not able to do it. I don't do the good I want to do; instead, I do the evil that I do not want to do... My inner being delights in the law of God. But I see a different law at work in my body – a law that fights against the law which my mind approves of. It makes me a prisoner to the law of sin which is at work in my body. What an unhappy man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is taking me to death? Thanks be to God, who does this through our Lord Jesus Christ!" (Rom 7:18-25).

For Christians, the answer therefore is Christ. In this mighty struggle for being good, Christ provides the inspiration and strength required. He is full of grace and truth (John 1:14). In him human dignity achieves plenitude. He remains a unique archetype, a life-giving spirit. He brings God and humankind together (1 Timothy 2:5). United to him they become participators in divine life. It is on this faith that Christianity is founded.

Surrendering to Christ does not stand on the way to progress, freedom or an optimistic view of human possibilities; in fact, it furthers them. For, human intelligence attains its utmost potential, not when it splits the atom or explores the distant skies, but when it discerns what is good and what is evil, when it makes a correct ethical choice with the help of Christ. It is in this that the human person becomes most like unto God. The image of the Father that is in him reveals itself. It is precisely then that the human being becomes fully human, capable of showing a path to the future to his fellow-beings. Pope Benedict XVI says: "The love of God is revealed in responsibility for others."¹⁷

¹⁷Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 28.