



# SOCIÉTÉ EUROPÉENNE DE CULTURE

*in collaborazione con la*  
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Fondazione Nazionale Carlo Collodi

*Sotto l'alto Patronato*  
*del Presidente della Repubblica Italiana*

*Patrocinio*  
Regione della Toscana  
Provincia di Pistoia  
Comune di Pescia  
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A.P.T. Montecristo Terme

## **LES CRISES DE NOTRE PRÉSENT ET LA RÉFÉRENCE ÉTHIQUE. APPEL AU DIALOGUE**

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# The Future of a Global Ethic: Politics of Culture in the Dialogue of Civilizations?

Michael Schäfer

Over the past decades, the idea of a global ethic has come to occupy an important place on the philosophical, political and inter-religious agenda. As with the term “Weltethos”, which was introduced for the inter-religious dialogue by the German Catholic theologian Hans Küng, the term “global ethic” raises several questions, such as whether it is actually new or simply another name for the age-old idea of a universal morality which can be traced back to the philosophy of Stoicism, through philosophers from Kant to Rawls up till the present day. But more importantly, why a global ethic is necessary, how it can be arrived at, and what its contents could or should be.<sup>1</sup> The *European Society of Culture* always addresses these and related questions. Almost 50 years ago the *European Society of Culture* declared in one of the first resolutions of her General Assembly that

“dialogue without prejudice, reserve or deception of any kind between individuals and peoples is, in itself, a cardinal force, capable of reducing the tensions of violence and radically transforming the conditions of existence in societies and the relations between peoples... .”<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the *European Society of Culture* has always insisted on the idea that it is peoples – not governments – who first and foremost bear the responsibility for peace. The *European Society of Culture* emphasizes this

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<sup>1</sup> Bhikhu Parekh: Principles of a Global Ethic. In: Global Ethics and Civil Society. Ed. by John Eade. Ashgate 2003, p.15.

<sup>2</sup> Resolution of the 7th General Assembly of the SEC (1958).

because it always held the strong belief that the field of action of the *politica della cultura*, which is at the core of thought of the Society, is not of that of state power but of civil society. This is a concept which I myself have also tried to work out in the last two international sessions of the *European Society of Culture* in Venice and Kazan in relation to the future possibilities of today's almost united Europe through the EU on the one hand, and in relation to the often complicated and complex dialogue between the Middle East and Europe on the other.<sup>3</sup>

In our advanced age of globalization, which has brought us closer together in the sense that we are all affected by each other's actions with ambivalent consequences, we should argue that the principles of a global ethic can only be achieved by means of a dialogue within and between societies. In the area of human rights such a dialogue has, in fact, been taking place throughout the second half of the last century on the basis of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (after the first proclamation of universal human rights in the eighteenth century), which has provided us with a general set of principles, clearly established and recognized in international law. Therefore, there is a current (though alas time and again fragile) consensus – comprised of respect for equal rights and human dignity, civil and political liberties, democratic freedoms and so on – which could serve as the basis for a global ethic. These principles are naturally far from fully realized, and – as for example seen in some places of recent history where elections have only paved the way for dictatorships and ethnic tensions – democracy in particular without the protection of basic liberties does not provide a guarantee that human rights will be respected.

Nevertheless the general principles are much more broadly accepted

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<sup>3</sup> See: M. Schäfer: Towards a Supranational European Civil Society. SEC/Venice 2005 and The Politics of Culture in the Dialogue of Civilizations: Europe and the Middle East. SEC/Kazan 2006 Both online: <http://www.societaeuropeacultura.it>

today than they were a few decades ago. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international covenants on human rights (in which economic, political, civil, cultural and social human rights are to be seen as a whole) have been gradually accepted in different legal systems around the globe, and have become a point of reference for people who long for human rights in every country. The world has *somewhat* improved insofar as today's world shows signs of positive progress towards the universal system of human rights while at the same time recognizing and embracing the need for respect for diverse cultures. The work of the United Nations has made a key contribution to the process, although there can be no justification for giving special status to individual European states that were great powers in 1945 but are no longer so today. Reforming the United Nations as a central institution for the implementation of a global ethic is a crucial and necessary task, which must be placed high on the political agenda.

However, like all general statements, universal principles are formal and vague in different degrees. When a cross-cultural global dialogue generates an agreed body of universal principles – and I believe we are unlikely to be able to go beyond a few very broad principles – we need to act cautiously when determining how to implement these principles. Since all societies have a stake in the conduct of global affairs and since societies have various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds and different institutional ways of organizing their political affairs and values, respect for the individual requires that they should be encouraged to experiment with diverse visions of the good life within the framework of a minimum standard for economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. If we want universal principles to become an integral part of every community's way of life and not just an imposed import, these principles need to be brought into a relationship with their traditions and institutional structures. The function of universal rights in a truly worldwide discussion is not to eliminate all such

differences, but rather to help us to manage them with mutual respect in order that human rights can be approached in a reasonably harmonious way that is meaningful and relevant in diverse cultural contexts.

But on their part, the political regimes of societies that strongly rely on cultural traditions also have to recognize that traditions only survive best, when they are not rigid and isolated, but open to new demands and corresponding ideas, from within and without. But as a side note, which country or society in the world today can claim seriously claim to be following its pure traditional culture? In our more and more with all cultures penetrated globalized world we are rather faced with a “clash *within* civilizations” than with a by Huntington predicted theory of a “clash of civilizations”.<sup>4</sup>

So, such needed status of *diversity in unity* – as for example realized in the European Union – is also a global common good and has nothing to do with cultural relativism. No single cultural tradition can claim ultimate truth or wisdom, or represents the only way to understand and order human life. We human beings have often learned from each other’s cultures, and still have much to learn. No single culture [in its entirety](#) is a substitute for human rights, because all cultures are incomplete, realizing some human capacities, cherishing some aspects of human life and ignoring others. Apart from that we should always be prepared to let other people define their own identity, and not insist on classifying them by our own criteria because the establishment of minimum standards and the incorporation of cultural rights actually facilitates the flexibility of human rights so as to be relevant to different cultures.

So, every human being has the right to culture, including the right to

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<sup>4</sup> See: Carl Gershman: The Clash Within Civilizations. In: *Journal of Democracy* 4 (1997), pp. 165–170.

enjoy and develop cultural life and identity. But today, we know also more than ever that without respect for the rights of the individual, no nation, no community, no society can be truly free. If we really believe in universal human rights in different cultural contexts, we must also recognize that an individual's sense of identity within a society is always bound up with the sense of belonging to one or more groups – “sometimes concentric, sometimes intersecting”.<sup>5</sup>

To sum up, a dialogue between different cultures combined with the element of consideration and respect for the Other increases their capacity for self-consciousness and self-criticism. Recognition and appreciation of the individuality of cultures and human beings is an absolute prerequisite for a reasonable dialogue of civilizations. Therefore recognition and appreciation of particular cultural contexts would rather serve to facilitate than reduce respect for human rights according behavior. Such a dialogue can without doubt be claimed to be an universal obligation: “A world dominated by a single view of culture would be not only bland and poor, but would also lack a critical partner and the space to look at itself from the standpoints of others, thus losing the vital capacity for a dialogue with itself.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Kofie Annan: Do we have still Universal Values? 3. Weltethos-Rede der Stiftung Weltethos an der Universität Tübingen. 1993, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Bhikhu Parekh: Principles of a Global Ethic. In: Global Ethics and Civil Society. Ed. by John Eade. Ashgate 2003, p. 30.