



Friendship and the Future of Interreligious Cooperation

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ABSTRACT

To face contemporary global challenges like climate change, interreligious cooperation that extends beyond mere dialogue or declaration will become increasingly important. Drawing upon Aristotle's multi-layered description of friendship and recognizing that nearly all the world's population is already implicitly involved in interreligious friendships of utility framed and enabled by global neoliberalism, this article argues for a constructive account of interreligious cooperation built upon interreligious friendship. This cooperation is localized, flexible, and open to participation by all in the community without requiring predetermined agreement or universally binding norms.

Keywords: global society, interreligious engagement, Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics

Religion and Global Challenges

To claim that globalization defines our everyday reality is no longer a contested statement. We have come to assume and expect the economic, political, cultural, environmental, and social interdependence of our global society. Yet, it is still unclear where religion does or ought to fit within this reality. To illuminate this ambiguity, allow me to reiterate the dilemma pointed to by Peter Singer:

Consider two aspects of globalization: first, the ability of people living in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Yemen to bring sudden death and terror to New York, London, Madrid, Paris, and Sydney; and second, the emission of greenhouse gases from power stations, vehicles, and even cattle. The former leaves unforgettable images that are watched on television screens all over the world; the other causes changes to the climate of our planet in ways that can only be detected by scientific instruments. Yet both are indications of the way in which we are now one world, and the more subtle changes to which our vehicle exhausts contribute are already

killing far more people than the highly visible deeds of terrorists.

Singer, as an enthusiastic atheist, makes no effort to suggest potential ways in which religious traditions and adherents might constructively engage globalization. Yet, the role that religious or spiritual beliefs play in determining the actions of people around the world cannot be ignored—according to the United Nations, “spiritual values guide and underpin the behavior of more than 80% of the people who live on earth.” For precisely that reason, the UN began attending to the role of interreligious and intercultural dialogue by establishing the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development in 2010 and, more specific to the environmental challenges noted above, the UN Environment Programme Faith for Earth Initiative in 2017.

For good reason (and following the environment thread noted above by Singer), select representatives from the world's religious traditions excitedly

embraced their newly discovered relevance. Books like *Love God, Heal Earth: 21 Leading Religious Voices Speak Out on Our Sacred Duty to Protect the Environment* immediately became an essential resource for comparatively illuminating how various religious traditions could be resourced to engage the environmental challenges of our time; declarations from the various religious traditions were prepared for the purpose of illuminating how care for the environment was not an external imposition but a task demanded by authoritative sources within their own tradition, and *Laudato Si'* by Pope Francis and “The Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change” by the Global Muslim Climate Network are excellent examples; large-scale efforts were devoted to creating activist-leaning networks, like Interfaith Power and Light, for the purpose of inspiring and mobilizing people of faith to take “bold and just action on climate change.”

Of course, the UN recognition of the role of religion in environmental concern should probably be understood as both a recognition of reality as it is and an invitation. Certainly, various expressions of Christianity had been concerned about the environment for decades already, and it could be argued that Buddhism has always been concerned about the integrity of the earth on its own terms (to name the existing trajectories of just two religious traditions). And yet, it is also true that the UN recognition provided a platform for religious traditions to either expand or initiate their engagement with the environment on a global scale.

In recent years, a plethora of religious declarations and statements affirming environmental concern have been offered from nearly all religious traditions. It is clear that virtually all of these statements recognize that the global nature of the

challenge requires interreligious cooperation in which all people of faith “vie with one another in doing good deeds” (Qur’an 5:48). Yet, despite these many expressions of goodwill, it remains unclear whether the interreligious cooperation necessary for addressing this global challenge is expressed in lived religion, in the everyday lives of people belonging to religious communities—for example, some data suggests that Christianity has an overall statistically-negative impact on global environmental attitudes in the United States, especially as church attendance increases; other research indicates that Muslims might have more pro-environmental values and beliefs than Christians, while yet other research suggests the opposite. In short, evidence for a grassroots embrace of intra-religious or interreligious cooperation that addresses this global challenge is difficult to find.

Beyond Declaration to Cooperation

To date, the bulk of the interreligious engagement around the environment has taken the form of what Jeannine Hill Fletcher has called the “Parliament Model” of interreligious dialogue, the familiar conceptualization of interreligious dialogue in which religions are treated as stable objects available for comment, explication, and comparison. And, using this model, interreligious dialogue gathers expert representatives from each tradition for the purpose of explicating, defending, and sometimes debating the doctrines and beliefs of religions.

There will always be a place for this sort of interreligious engagement but, increasingly, activism is already embedded in the interreligious dialogue around the environment. In the activist model, religion is not merely a collection of texts, beliefs, or truth claims; it is also social and political and, therefore, it plays an active role in

mobilizing people for the transformation of the world. The uniqueness of our present context is that the experts and institutional leaders performing the formal parliamentary role with authority are also the same people publicly advocating activism. The result is that one usually finds general, delocalized, or abstract exhortations to embody environmental concern in everyday life from experts or institutional leaders that may or may not be organically linked to the lived experience of localized communities of faith. For example, while “The Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change” is an excellent summary of an Islam that is oriented toward environmental activism, it cannot perform anything on its own except call upon Muslims in other capacities—heads of state, political leaders, the business community, religious leaders and scholars, etc—to embody the vision sketched in the document by religious and environmental experts. Denominational statements within Christian circles function in much the same way.

From the other direction, the forms of dialogue usually associated with everyday life—whether labeled the “storytelling model” or the “dialogue of life”—have been construed as descriptive of life and qualitatively different from a dialogue of activism or dialogue in community. Of course, it is expected that various forms of interreligious dialogue are not mutually exclusive and, thus, overlap is to be expected. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that existing models of interreligious dialogue—with their dependence on explicit exchange of religious language or reasons—struggle to account for the holistic nature of everyday existence, that is, the integrated manner in which global citizens already perform interreligious cooperation at local, national, and global levels. For example, every single day Christians drive cars fueled by

gasoline bought from Muslims, Muslims eat fish caught by Buddhists, medical equipment made by Hindus save the lives of Jews, national armies made up of adherents of various religious traditions prepare to kill adherents of the very same religions from other nations or regions, and the list could go on. And, at the same time, all breathe the air and drink the water polluted by all. This is the true “dialogue of life” that demands further attention—all too often, implicit interreligious cooperation of this sort is framed and enabled by global neoliberalism rather than justifications internal to religious traditions.

Further, even in its most nuanced forms, interreligious dialogue increasingly fails to provide a comprehensive framework for the complex manner in which global citizens of various socio-economic classes from manifold religions interact with one another. If we are to meet the environmental challenges facing all of us today, new conceptions of how we live together with purpose are needed, more adequate accounts of how we constructively cooperate without erasing religious convictions and differences are needed.

To be sure, interreligious dialogue is important and will continue to be part of the interreligious landscape indefinitely, but it ought to be supplemented with something like interreligious cooperation, an account of how people with different religious identities come together to build mutually inspiring relationships and engage in common action around issues of shared concern or, even more simply, a thicker conceptualization of “activities and projects that draw participants from more than one faith tradition, denomination, spiritual movement, or religion and often include secular participants and organizations as well.”

Interreligious Cooperation as Friendship

For many people, interreligious dialogue is a daunting prospect for any number of reasons: inequity in knowledge or education between participants, uncertainty about the assumptions brought to the table by other participants, worry about the perception of the activity by those belonging to one's own religion, hesitancy about its purpose or goals, biases that condition the perception of the other, and the list could go on. But, if Hill Fletcher is right (and I think she is), then the everydayness of religion is already "embedded in and intertwined with other aspects of our lived condition: economics, gender, social relations, material conditions, life stages, family relationships, and more." What is most needed today in our globalized context is not some way of beginning interreligious dialogue; what is needed today are ways of cultivating and further developing the interreligious relationships in which we already participate. Of course, there could be many ways of conceptualizing how this task might be accomplished, and I suggest that the example of friendship to illuminate one path forward.

Friendship is somewhat difficult to define, yet we recognize it when we experience it. One might say it is the process through which a person that is unknown becomes familiar, where the other is humanized, where trust is developed through time, where intimacy emerges through familiarity, and affection takes the place of animosity. Of course, the interest here is not merely in friendship as such, but the role that friendship might play in interreligious cooperation. To that end, I draw upon the description of friendship offered by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, with the assumption that other understandings may be just as illuminating.

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* provides one of the most developed accounts of friendship in the ancient world. In it, he begins by identifying three objects of love: what is pleasant, what is useful, and what is good. And, corresponding to these, he identifies three types of friendships:

1. Friendship of pleasure—love of the other for the sake of pleasure to oneself. These friendships are incidental, easily dissolved, and usually ascribed to relations between young people.
2. Friendship of utility—love of the other for the sake of what is good for themselves. These friendships may not entail pleasure, but they are maintained only to the extent that the friends are useful to one another, often associated with exchange, and usually they are found between old people.
3. Friendship of the good—this is perfect friendship, friendship between those who are good and alike in virtue. These friendships are also pleasant, but not based on pleasure; long-lasting, but rare; and they require time and familiarity for trust to develop.

While Aristotle's typology of friendship is further nuanced in *Nicomachean Ethics*, the summary outline presented above is provocatively illuminating when it is applied to interreligious cooperation. Allow me to explain.

First, the parallel between interreligious cooperation and the friendship of utility is obvious. Recognizing this provides (a) an honest window into the reality that so many of our interreligious relationships already function in this manner, whether the utility is material, social, or economic, and (b) a recognition that these interreligious friendships could be oriented to better uses (i.e. towards environmental justice instead of the implicitly supporting the current form of globalization that is dependent on environmental consumption and economic

inequality). Or, to restate differently, all of the interreligious declarations concerning care for the environment are worth very little unless people of all religious traditions transform their existing, everyday friendships of utility toward objectives that align with environmental care.

Second, conceiving of interreligious cooperation, at least initially, as friendships of utility relieves many of the pressures and concerns that haunt interreligious dialogue. For example, Aristotle frees us to think of interreligious cooperation as necessary for engaging the global environmental challenge whether it is pleasant or not (though we all hope it is pleasant too). On the other hand, it also frees us to unhitch interreligious cooperation from prerequisite knowledge of and judgments concerning other religious traditions which, in turns, opens the possibility of interreligious cooperation to all members of any given society. It makes no pretensions of achieving anything beyond what one needs to accomplish, and one can come to a decision about what needs to be accomplished for reasons internal to one's own religious tradition (or perhaps no religious tradition). Or, to restate differently, no theological or philosophical assumptions or agreements about God or humans are preconditions for working together in pursuit of a common goal which is, in this case, responding to our current environmental catastrophe—friendship of utility allows what one might call “tactical alliances” between friends that have very different reasons for achieving the same end.

That said, thirdly, the time spent working together in interreligious cooperation may yet lead to a deeper understanding and trust between friends in a manner that reveals shared virtues and a shared pursuit of the good. The result is an inversion of what

might be expected: rather than needing shared religious convictions to begin caring for the earth, the process of working together to care for the earth on the basis of convictions drawn from different sources may still reveal the good and virtuous that is shared between friends. Of course, this does not mean that friendships of the good cannot entail disagreements and differences of belief, since friends are not merely replications of oneself. But, it does mean that good and virtuous people can become trustworthy and true friends on the basis of their character despite other differences. For this reason, it should not be surprising that friendships of the good, as characterized by Aristotle, may occasionally emerge through interreligious cooperation.

Finally, perhaps a word about intra-religious friendships is also necessary. Any cursory glance at the contemporary context reveals that interreligious environmental cooperation is going to be very difficult unless there is intra-religious dialogue and friendships that paves the way. That is to say that if it really is the case that most people orient their lives based on religious convictions of one kind or another, then it is not going to be people of other religions that will convince people to care for the environment. Rather, speaking from within their own traditions, environmental advocates are going to have to develop cooperative friendships within their own religious communities as a foundation from which interreligious cooperation grows. For all their limitations, public declarations and statements by religious bodies are at least foundations that pave the way for precisely this sort of intra-religious friendships.

Conclusion

The existence of the field of global ethics is indebted to the late Hans Küng. In his *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New*

World Ethic, he tried to make the case that universally binding norms are needed to address the economic, political, and ecological challenges facing the world. He argued further that the world's religions ought to determine these universal and absolute ethical demands through interreligious dialogue and, in this way, they will lay the foundation for the agreement of all around the world. Almost two and a half decades later, Heather Widdows' *Global Ethics: An Introduction* implicitly writes a silent obituary to Kūng's project with only a single mention of religion in her entire volume.

With the deepest respect for Kūng's legacy, I have suggested that interreligious dialogue—and especially interreligious dialogue that operates on the assumption that it speaks prescriptively for everyday adherents of the world's religions—fails to

capture the dynamics of interreligious relationships in our current context. In essence, it seems to be incapable of moving beyond dialogue to environmental action in ways that matter to the everyday lives of religious adherents. For this reason, I have attempted to illuminate the possibilities opened when the impetus is shifted from dialogue to cooperation. To accomplish this task, I have drawn upon Aristotle's account of friendship as an example of how one might reimagine both the limits and possibilities of interreligious cooperation in a preliminary way.

No doubt there are other and perhaps much better ways to move beyond the seeming stagnation in interreligious dialogue to concrete interreligious cooperation in caring for the world. I certainly hope so, since our collective survival depends on it.[]

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