

It is Time to Talk about Responsibility

Let me start out with a few remarks about the dichotomy of the ongoing global development, about its implicated dangers and about the desirable efforts to establish world-wide a minimal body of ethical ground rules.

Let me explain the dichotomy. On the one side, almost all of mankind is nowadays engaged in a globalisation of technology. Some countries started earlier, some later. Korea started its globalisation rather early in the 1960s already. Germany had been globalised already beforehand. But globalisation is not limited to technology, it is also globalisation of information, of economic markets, and also of economic behaviour. But on the other hand, we do at the same time maintain sharply conflicting ideologies and sharply conflicting religions and even more so conflicting fundamentalisms.

This may create a dangerous situation in the 21st Century. Quite a few people tend to think that in the next century, clashes between civilisations might become unavoidable. There are several examples for this concern. Let me, for instance, point to the possible clash between the Islamic part of mankind and the Western civilisation. Or, secondly, let me point to a thinkable clash between Jewish/Israeli nationalism, on the one side, and, on the other, the Moslem/Palestinian nationalism, with violent fundamentalists on both sides. Or a third example is the danger of a deep clash between Pakistani and Indian nationalisms, propelled by religious fundamentalists on either side, Moslems and Hindus.

In my personal view, the most dangerous possible civilisational clash is thinkable between American/Western Civil Rights-fundamentalism, and on the opposite side, Confucianist, or the so-called socialist Chinese approach to modernity. If such a clash were to happen, then the ideological struggle might just serve as an initial disguise for a cold war between the two world powers, America and China.

Whether or not some such civilisational clashes will indeed happen, or whether or not we can avoid them from happening, will, of course, in the main depend on the political leaders - on their wisdom or on their limitations, maybe even on their fanaticism. But also will it depend on the insights and behaviour of religious and spiritual leaders. It will also depend on the behaviour of academics and teachers in our schools and universities. It will heavily depend on either the responsibility or the irresponsibility of the public mass media in all our countries. And in the final analysis, the world's peace will as well hinge on us citizens, on our individual behaviour and responsibility.

If we look back, let us say, half a century or so, to the end of Hitlers and the Japanese dictatorship in Europe and Asia, it was most natural then that the liberated nations did give priority to guaranteeing the fundamental rights for the individual person, or, in the United Nations' jargon: "human rights" for any individual person. At the end of both Hitler's European dictatorship and Japan's military occupation and dictatorship in East and Southeast Asia, the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights 50 years ago was a natural and at the same time necessary and good decision.

Looking back even deeper into the past, one will have to observe that the establishment of fundamental rights of the individual person in the West, two and a half-centuries ago, went hand in hand with the creation and organisation of democratic societies and democratic states. So, in England and in the United States of America, so in France and in some other European countries as well. It was such again in Europe after the collapse of Mussolini and Hitler's dictatorships in the late 1940s and again after the end of the Communist dictatorships in the 1990s. And it was similar in your own country after the end of the Korean War in the 1950s.

Nowadays quite a few people in the Western countries tend to misunderstand or misinterpret their personal freedom and their fundamental rights in so far as they do not even consider their own personal responsibility. In my view, if individuals rightly claim their rights only, but do not accept any responsibility for their behaviour, then a whole society, a whole nation and its state may fall into animosity. Even mankind as such may fall into animosity, into conflict and finally into chaos. It is hard to learn, but it is an undeniable fact that peace does require a will for compromises. Who abhors compromise, will act irresponsibly. Without the sense of responsibility, the freedom of

any individual can soon degenerate into a situation of hegemony by the strong and the mighty, as well as inside ones society but also between nations and states. Therefore, politicians as well as citizens should strive to keep rights and responsibilities in balance.

Today, nearly half a century after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, these rights, which are necessary ethical imperative, are being endangered. They are being endangered, because some Western leaders, particularly some Americans, are misusing the concept and the term "human rights" as a kind of verbal weapon, as an aggressive instrument for pressure in the field of foreign affairs. And they do it in a rather selective way. They use it, for instance, against China or against Iran or Libya, but not for instance against Israel or against Saudi Arabia or others. The reasons for this selective use of that pressure instrument, of course, are to be found in geo-strategic or domestic political interests.

Now, on the other side, for quite a few Moslems and Hindus and Confucianists, the ideal of human rights appears to be a typical Western concept. And some therefore denounce it as being just a propaganda instrument in order to prolongate Western predominance. Furthermore, one hears well-founded accusations, voiced by some Christians and more generally by Asians, that the concept of fundamental rights of the individual does neglect or even ignore the importance of the personal virtue of obligation and responsibility. Obligation and responsibility vis-à-vis one's family and ones community, vis-à-vis the society as a whole and the obligation vis-à-vis the state. Some Asians do stress what they perceive as two opposing concepts of what makes human dignity: the Western concept and the Asian concept.

Indubitably the concepts of the human being and of human dignity do in fact vary. They have varied in the course of history, in the course of cultural and civilisational evolution in different continents and in different countries as well. They differ in their religious, philosophical or ideological points of view. They differ also inside a given religion, a given society or a given culture or civilisation. In general, there are indeed real and great differences between Europe and North America as opposed to Asia's Islam, Hindu, Buddhist and Confucianist ideas and ideals, not to mention Communism and all its variations.

One has therefore to fear future conflicts between civilisations. There will always be fundamentalists on all the sides and there will always be violence from

various sides. Fundamentalism plus violence can trigger off terrible mass hysteria. We have seen mass hysteria happening in our lifetime in several places on the surface of this continent.

Today's worldwide development of economic interaction, the so-called globalisation, will not necessarily stand in the way of fundamentalist mass hysteria, in as much as the globalisation will bring about new conflicts of economic interests.

Since the end of the Soviet bloc, and particularly since the opening up of China due to Deng Xiaoping and the present leadership in China, the number of people competing with each other in the open world markets has nearly doubled. The participants in the world economy have doubled over the last 20 years. Not only 1.2 billion Chinese have joined but also have 300 million people who live on the soil of the former Soviet Union plus the Vietnamese etc.

If you add to that the enormous technological steps that have been made especially in tele-communication, in air traffic and sea-container transportation as well as the high degree of liberalisation of trade and especially of the money markets and the long-term capital markets, higher than ever recorded in the past, it is clear that in the beginning of the 21st Century, the world's nations and their economies will depend much more on each other than ever in former generations and centuries. Mankind as a whole will be much more intertwined than ever before in history.

At the same time, globalisation will lead to new and unknown rivalries and the temptation to resort to egoistic power policies may very well increase. Therefore, peace could very well collapse, if nations and states, if politicians as well as religious leaders and institutions, if they do not learn to respect and to accept other people's religious and cultural and civilisational heritages. And if people do not learn to keep a balance between both the basic or categorical imperatives, namely freedom of the individual, on the one side, and responsibility or duty of that same individual, on the other side.

This is why at the turn of our century, 50 years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations, it is time to talk about human responsibilities. A minimum of world-wide-recognised ethical standards is an imperative necessity for inter-continental co-existence. Not only as far as individual behaviour is concerned

but also for political authorities, for religious societies and churches, as well as for nations and states and their governments. It becomes a necessity for international manufacturing corporations or trading and financing corporations, the latter being in serious danger of falling into a new kind of world-wide, speculative predatory capitalism. The necessity for conscientious responsibility counts, all the same, for the international media, which runs the danger of poisoning people world-wide with murder, shooting, violence and all kinds of abuse.

Now, in order to avoid any clash of civilisations, a number of elder statesmen, former presidents and heads of governments from all five continents, with outstanding religious and philosophical academics as advisors (by the way, including three Koreans, one being Prof. Shin) got together in order to analyse the situation and options for action. The first meeting was about 12 years ago. We were able to produce a meeting of minds and in the end of about 10 years of deliberations, we came forward with a draft (which I understand is in your hands) for what we call "A Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities." I would like to repeat that it took about one decade of preparations and deliberations between political leaders, philosophical leaders, religious leaders of all the religions of the world, including Confucianism, all the ideologies, including Communism, to prepare the draft. (By the way: it has never really been clear in my mind whether Confucianism is a religion or a philosophy or something in between, but certainly is it a very strong set of ethical rules).

Our first objective is to start a global discussion. And the hope is that such a discussion will in the end lead to a similar United Nations Declaration as the first one - 50 years ago - under the name of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration of Human Responsibilities would be of a character similar to that of the Human Rights Declaration, namely it would be an ethical appeal, and not in itself an international law.

The Declaration of Human Rights in the meantime, has led to some international pacts, particularly in Europe, for instance, the European Human Rights Convention, or the installation of the European Court of Justice for Human Rights. And not to be forgotten are the effects and repercussions of the Helsinki Final Declaration of 1975 and its famous "basket 3" on the domestic political situation in a number of countries, particularly inside the Soviet Union and other Soviet dominated states.

Since the text of our draft is in your hand, I am not going to read it out to you. I just would like to draw your attention to two or three of the articles. In Article 4, our draft does repeat the Golden Rule which does play an important role in all the world's religions; to put into short-hand: "Do as you want to be done by. Do vis-à-vis others as you want to be done by them."

I would also like to quote Article 9 that states, "All people have a responsibility to overcome poverty, malnutrition, ignorance and inequality. They should promote sustainable development all over the world in order to assure dignity, freedom, security and justice for all people."

Furthermore, Article 15 says, "Representatives of religions have the duty to avoid prejudices and discrimination of other beliefs. They have the duty to foster tolerance and mutual respect."

Let me insert here a short paragraph about my home country, Germany. In my country, many managers in business, and quite a few politicians, many television and media people, do not live up to their duties. They enjoy using their freedom but the society doesn't enjoy their responsibility. For instance, there prevails too much permissive education in my country, responsibilities and fundamental duties are rarely mentioned. Inconsideration, egoism and the so-called "self-realization" seem to be today's ideal for many, and they just pay lip service to the public's welfare.

But if you look at the world as a whole, quite a few managers in industry today, do not acknowledge their moral duty of creating jobs in cases of unemployment inside their societies. They do not acknowledge their duty of implementing training programmes for young people. More and more of them seem to adhere to what they call "shareholder value" as a guiding ideology for what they do or not do. More and more of them attach to the price of their shares and dividends a higher importance than they attach to their moral responsibilities. This is the case, not just in the United States of America but also in Europe as well as in Asia. But if society does not cultivate its civil virtues, then society can degenerate into a political chaos of conflicts of interests.

On the other hand, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 already did mention individual duties in its Article 29, at least in a general stipulation: "Each individual does have the duty towards community, because that is the only way to

allow personal freedom and full development.” But nowadays, one rarely hears any reference to Article 29 of that Declaration.

I have to admit that, of course, our draft of the Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities does also meet with several criticisms. In the West, the draft is being confronted by two main criticisms. So-called pragmatic politicians say that this draft is all too idealistic, without a chance of global acceptance and without a chance to be followed afterwards. On the other side, some Western advocates of human rights argue that our draft Declaration of Human Responsibilities is kind of a twin to the Human Rights Declaration, and may drag down the effects of the original rights concept.

Quite differently, in Asia, some do criticise that although the draft of responsibility does coincide in many ways with Asian cultural traditions and should therefore be welcome, they feel its proximity to the Declaration of Human Rights is superfluous and therefore arouses suspicions.

In the course of ten years' deliberations among religious leaders from other quarters, I have learned that Mahatma Gandhi once upon a time has listed several social sins. Let me quote two of them. He has for instance declared: “Politics without principles is a social sin.” Also has he declared: “Commerce without morality is a sin vis-à-vis the society.” Who would undertake to contradict these statements? Some time ago, the Financial Times, a great newspaper of London, has written about our draft for the Declaration of Human Responsibilities, and I quote “Right, we do need general rules of business behaviour...It could be of general advantage for the brains of general managers if we had a universal declaration of business responsibilities.” Also this line of thought could become fruitful, if indeed our draft would trigger a worldwide discussion.

So far, a few governments have asked for a discussion of this draft in the plenary of the United Nations. There are some other people who in the meantime have thought along similar lines and come up with parallel drafts. Quite a few outstanding personalities in all the five continents have put their names to our draft in the meantime, apart from those 30 former heads of state or government who initiated the draft in the beginning.

But I would have to admit that our draft of the Universal Declaration of Responsibilities is just one of the desirable efforts to be established in the conscience of mankind in order to reach a consensus on a minimal code of ethical ground rules. We do need other efforts as well. We do need efforts by teachers and priests and academics to contribute to the idea of a global ethical minimum – and by politicians as well. Otherwise, the age of globalised television and internet may turn out into an era of superficiality, plus intolerance and strife.