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Francesco Sidoti (eds.)

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Contents

Foreword 9

Selda Çağlar
Protection System of Women's Human Rights in Turkey 15

Hakan Karakehya
Witness statement as evidence in Turkish criminal procedures 27

Nazmiye Özenbaş
Crime of Organ or Tissue Trade 45

Özgür Oğuz
The Workers' Right to Terminate Labour Contract for Valid Reasons in Occupational Health and Safety 57

Sadullah Özel
The Principle of Proportionality in Terms of Expropriation 63

Gaye Tuğ Levent & Gülcan Azimli Çilingir
Implementation of the Judicial Assistance System in Turkey Example of the Province of Van 73

Murat Kayalar, Elif Türkan Arslan, Savas Yıldız, Behiç Çetin & Sehriban Aygün
Whistleblowing Related Legal Practices in Turkey 81

Çiğdem Mine Yılmaz
Legal Type Of Marıtal Regıme Between Spouses In Turkısh Law With General Survey of Marital If An Alien Element Occurs 95

Nazmiye Özenbas
Protection of personal data in terms of criminal law 105

Oya Acet Özcan
New Social Movements in Turkey and The Role of the Alternetive Media in Framing Contention: Case of the Others' Post 117

Mahmut Güler
"Village" Neighborhoods in the New Metropolitan Regulation and their Administration 139

Vehbi Kara
Ownership and Liberty Era 151

Nedret Çağlar
The Contribution of Turkish Republic Citizens Living in The EU to The Results of Presidential Elections in 2014 161

Özlem Çakar Çelik
City Perception of University Students From Different Socio-Economic Environments 173

Aytul Kasapoglu
The Status and Problems of Sociology on Its Centennial Anniversery in Turkey 185

Uğur Gündüz
Humorous Discourse on Social Media 195

Uğur Gündüz & Nilüfer Pembecioğlu
The Consequences of Creative Industries: Media, The Film Industry, Toys, and Games 207

H. Burçin Henden Şolt
Urban Children and Child Friendly Cities 219

M. Funda Afyonoğlu & Merve Ertene
The Question of Change in Philosophies of Kant and Sartre 229

İ. Okan Akkın
Problematising the problem of participation in art and politics 237

H. Nurgül Begiç
Traditional Felt Master Mustafa Yünel in Ödemiş, Bademli 251

Andrea Lombardinilo
The memory is the message. McLuhan: symbolism as parataxis 263

Vedat Çalışkan, Faize Sarış, Muhammed Zeynel Öztürk & Berrin Gültay
Economic and Commercial Spatial Connections of the Traditional Country Fairs in Turkey 273

Güneş Açelya Sipahi & Meltem Onay
In Family Foundation, The Point of View of Level Five Leadership Between Generations 287

Aydın Görmez
Light Shining in Buckinghamshire: Rediscovering English Civil War 297

Ali Serdar & Reyhan Tutumlu Serdar
An Unknown Novel, An Unknown Novelist: Belkıs Sami, *I Have Killed My Love* 305

Emine Yavaşgel & Ece Karadoğan Doruk
Debates On Religious Pluralism And Dialogue 315

Remziye Ceylan & Neriman Aral
The Opinions of Classroom Teachers and Normally Developing Children on Inclusive Practice Introduction 329

Emine Yavaşgel & Ece Karadoğan Doruk

Debates On Religious Pluralism And Dialogue

1. Dynamics of the sacred and social cycles

The concept of "sacred" refers, among other things, to faith- and morality-related values and principles (Asıkoglu, 1997, p. 296).

Sacred is a term we use to refer to things that are religious, spiritual, clean, respected, and free from defects.

Sacred values play an important role in the development of an individual's identity and personality. Human beings have a social/cultural dimension as well as a biological one. To develop an identity and a healthy, coherent, and consistent personality, needs arising from both of these dimensions have to be met (Maslow, 1970, pp. 90–1).

Language, religion, art, literature, traditions, and the like constitute the basic dynamics of the local culture taught to individuals through education. This is a necessary condition for an individual to develop a social/cultural identity.

Faith-related values are among the most fundamental values that keep a society together. They are the most important values that connect individuals to one another. Contemporary debates are taking place about the meaning and significance of these values. It is clear that some of the experiences humanity has had in this century form the foundation for the renewed interest in the sacred. It is well known that in the Middle Ages, sacred values played an important role in social life, both in the West and in the East. During that period, the Islamic world was able to preserve its religious and moral values more or less intact, preventing the degeneration of social and political structures. In the West, these values were very influential during the Middle Ages, but started to lose their stature when the Church attempted to use them as a means of exploitation, the loss of status accelerating particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries. Yet, in the beginning of the 20th century, the Christian West still viewed itself as the master of the world (Meric, 1996, p. 20), a contention it fought to get the rest of the world to accept. This dominance, however, was shattered in World Wars I and II.

By the end of the 20th century, rapid changes were observed in individual and social life. Developments in the technology of communication played an undeniable role in this change and increasing connectedness. It became impossible for individuals and societies to live with their own cultures, traditions, beliefs, and value judgments in isolation from the rest of the world. The necessity of living

together with people of different cultures, worldviews and faiths forced everyone to think about the question of how to deal with this new situation.

Given that societies are searching for new approaches, it is clear that they have problems that need resolving. This applies to the Western world as well. The problem is qualitative, not quantitative. Leaving aside the developments in science, ideology, technology and industry, the lack of ethical values in existing democracies has led, in many regions of the world, to conflicts based on ethnic, religious, political, and economic divisions. Everyone seems to have realised that these conflicts cannot end by the sheer use of force. Most of these conflicts seem to be based on ethnic identities. However, behind these ethnic identities, what people are really trying to protect are ***sacred*** values that they view as constituting their identities, and the local culture within which these values reside.

It was already argued above that given the developments in this century, there has been renewed interest in the sacred as a solution to problems of social injustice and unrest. This interest, however, has failed to bring about the expected positive results, as demonstrated by experience. Political and religious conflicts, sometimes in the guise of ethnic conflicts and seen in many countries including economically advanced ones such as the United States and Japan, the long-running war between Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East, and fundamentalist (radical) movements in Muslim-majority North African countries can help humanity recognise the potential power of the sacred. The task before us is to find a way to use this power for good, and prevent its degeneration into something else. Otherwise, the problems that will ensue will not be limited to certain regions of the world but be global in scope (Huntington, 1997, p. 362). 9/11 has already made that much very clear.

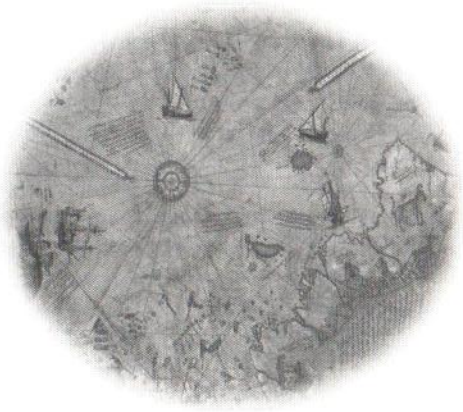
2. Religious pluralism

In today's world, we are witnessing an era in which religious and cultural isolationism are truly coming to an end. Religious and cultural pluralism are being recognised as an unavoidable reality, and we are entering an "age of dialogue" in our relations with followers of different religious traditions (Aydın, 2005, p. 18).

> In this post-modern world, it is becoming clear that intolerant and aggressive missionary work and proselytism, to persuade followers of another religious tradition to give up their faith, and thus to sideline the religious tradition in question, is a futile effort. This is because the idea of hegemony of one religion over others has already lost its appeal, being replaced by the idea that people of different traditions and faiths, in all corners of the world, should live together in peace, and should practice mutual respect and understanding toward one another (Aydın, 2005, p. 18).

Globalism has resulted in the questioning of old approaches and views that limited faiths to within cultural and geographical boundaries. Now people of different cultures and religious traditions are coming into contact more than ever and living together. The world has truly become a "global village," allowing members of different cultures and religions to develop closer personal relationships. As a result, it has become common practice for individuals to compare their faith with the faiths of other individuals with whom they develop personal ties, and to re-evaluate their own faith. Some of the main factors leading to these developments were as follows (Aydın, 2005, p. 19):

- Thanks to developments in transportation technologies, members of different religions can easily travel to other countries, carrying with them their cultures including religious beliefs, languages, culinary tastes, dress codes, customs, and traditions The increasingly widespread availability of international travel makes it easier for people of different cultures and religious traditions to meet with one another on a personal basis, and for the first time, learn about other religions from their followers.
- Religious traditions and beliefs have been the subject of increasingly rigorous scientific inquiry, especially in the last two centuries, making it possible to access accurate and impartial information about other religions and faiths. There is now a large body of academic literature on major world religions including Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Holy books and other foundational texts of these religions are available in translation in almost all corners of the world. These studies have made it easier for readers to access accurate information about major world religions, and correct their misguided, partial or prejudiced views about these religions. The accurate and objective knowledge thus gained has increased the amount of tolerance and respect toward other religions and their followers.
- Intellectual developments from the beginning of the 20th century onward have contributed to the development of a positive attitude toward religious pluralism. No religious tradition can claim superiority over others by exclusive reliance on dogmatic statements. Claims of superiority by one religious tradition over others can be measured only by the moral benefits it confers upon its followers. That is to say, claims of superiority between religions are decided not by theoretical argumentation but by the benefits their followers derive in their lives.



- As a result of international migration after the Second World

War, followers of different faiths and religious traditions started to live and work together, especially in Western countries. So much so that there are five million Muslims living in South America today, and an even larger number living in Europe. Similarly, both Americas and Europe have large Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist communities. As a result, members of different religions not only have more accurate scientific information about each other's religions and beliefs, they also have a chance to get to know followers of these religions on a personal, face-to-face basis.

- Technological developments, media of mass communication such as newspapers, journals, radio and television, and more recently, the rapid advancement of the internet, electronic mail and other means of communication have forced members of different religious traditions to develop relationships with one another that are based on mutual respect and understanding.
- These five major developments have led, in the Western Christian world, to the relativisation of the truth. Accordingly, truth, seen as unchanging and eternal, came to be viewed as dynamic and historical. This is is because truth is in the eye of the beholder. Ergo, any view that claims to have exclusive possession of absolute truth need to be refused.

Pluralism "is a model that aims to go beyond the dichotomy of exclusivism and inclusivism, by refusing to argue either for the existence of one true religion or for making one's religion so inclusive that it covers the members of all religious traditions and faiths, and instead arguing that each religious tradition or faith can lead their followers to salvation independent of others" (Aydın, 2005, p. 33). According to this approach, major world religions are different responses to the same *Ultimate Transcendental Being* that resides beyond human faculties.

According to pluralism, truth is absolute, not relative: all world religions aim, ultimately, to take their followers to God or the centre of Truth. This unity of purpose indicates that they are different paths leading to the *Ultimate Transcendental Being*.

However, actions to be taken to grasp and define this Truth are relative. This model represents a radical change in the relationships between followers of different religious traditions; it is a novel paradigm. This paradigm is a different approach relative to what came before. According to this pluralist paradigm, no religious tradition or founder of religion has a monopoly on salvation. This is because salvation is the result of God's grace only, and some version of the idea of salvation, through different methods and paths, is found in all religious traditions. Thus, pluralism represents, for its proponents, a new approach regarding the place of one's religion and its relationship wih other religions (Aydın, 2005, p. 35).

Although there is a great diversity of religions in the world, the **"golden rule"** in all of them is the principle of *love and compassion.* This **golden rule** is expressed in different ways in the major world religions (Aydın, 2005, pp. 37–8):

- None of you will truly believe until you love for your brother what you love for yourself (Islam).
- Do to others as you would like them to do to you (Christianity).
- That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah (Judaism).
- A man should wander about treating all creatures as he himself would be treated (Jainism).
- Putting oneself in the place of another, one should not kill nor cause another to kill (Buddhism).
- What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others (Confucianism).
- Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain, and your neighbor's loss as your own loss (Taoism).
- Human nature only is good when it shall not do unto another whatever is not good for its own self (Zoroastrianism).

In addition, it must be remembered that all major world civilisations contain vices as well as virtues. For example (Aydın, 2005, pp. 17–51):

- The vice of the Indian caste system as opposed to the vice of the European class system;
- The poverty of Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim countries as opposed to the irresponsible consumption of non-renewable natural resources and pollution of the environment by many Christian countries;
- Social problems in many poor countries as opposed to high rates of drug use, violence, and crime in developed European countries;
- Oppression and torture by some Eastern regimes as opposed to the long-running anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in Christian Europe.

Thus, from the perspective of pluralism, "the claim that any one religious tradition creates more virtues and fewer vices compared to other religions is untenable. Of course it is possible that, in the eyes of God or the Divine Being, one religious tradition may be superior to others. But from our partial or fallible human perspective, these religious traditions represent different paths for humanity to communicate with God" (Hick, 1987, p. 29).

John Hick, a prominent defender of the model of religious pluralism, argues that a "Copernican revolution" is taking place in theology. According to Hick, "it is time for humanity to drop the Ptolemaic view of religion centered around a single religious tradition, in favor of a God-centered Copernican view" (Hick, 1993, pp. vii–ix).

The Copernican revolution involved a shift from the dogma that the earth is the centre of the revolving universe to the realisation that it is the sun that is at the centre, with all the planets, including our own earth, moving around it. And the needed Copernican revolution in theology involves an equally radical transformation in our conception of the universe of faiths and the place of our own religion within it. It involves a shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre to the realisation that it is God who is at the

centre, and that all the religions of mankind, including our own, serve and revolve around him. (Hick, 1993, p. 131).

The model of religious pluralism has been debated for a long time now, and in a symposium held in the UK in 2003, titled *"The Pluralist Model: A Multireligious Exploration,"* it was reconsidered in the context of Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism. At the end of the symposium, the following "key principles of religious pluralism" were adopted and declared by the unanimous consensus of all participants (Aydın, 2005, p. 43):

- Interreligious Dialogue and engagement should be the way for religions to relate to one another. A paramount need is for religions to heal antagonisms among themselves.
- The dialogue should engage the pressing problems of the world today, including war, violence, poverty, environmental devastation, gender injustice, and violation of human rights.
- Absolute truth claims can easily be exploited to incite religious hatred and violence.
- The religions of the world affirm ultimate reality/truth which is conceptualised in different ways.
- While ultimate reality/truth is beyond the scope of complete human understanding, it has found expression in diverse ways in the world's religions.
- The great world religions with their diverse teachings and practices constitute authentic paths to the supreme good.
- The world's religions share many essential values, such as love, compassion, equality, honesty, and the ideal of treating others as one wishes to be treated oneself.
- All persons have freedom of conscience and the right to choose their own faith.
- While mutual witnessing promotes mutual respect, proselytizing devalues the faith of the other.

Pluralism argues for taking the religious experiences of all humanity seriously. According to this pluralist model, major world religions are ultimately different paths for salvation leading to the "Divine Truth" or "Ultimate Transcendental Being." On this basis, pluralism "aims to institute equality between followers of different religious traditions and advance justice and tolerance in our contemporary world of intolerance and oppression" (Aydın, 2005, p. 49).

3. Parliament of the World's Religions and universal ethics

➢ The idea of a global ethic

The search continues for a better future for humanity. There are efforts to develop common values on the basis of world religions to solve global problems. One such effort was "*Toward a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration,*" presented at the second meeting of the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1993, and proclaimed as *The Declaration of a Global Ethic* (Yavasgel, 2004, p. 135).

The first meeting of the Parliament of the World's Religions was held in Chicago in 1893. However, no representatives from the Islamic world attended this first Parliament. German philospher Dr. Hans Küng, the architect of the Declaration for a Global Ethic, presented at the second Parliament of the World's Religions, similarly held in Chicago, explains the basis of this declaration as follows (Küng & Kuschel, 1995, p. 10).

> We are interdependent. Each of us depends on the well-being of the whole… We take individual responsibility for all we do. All our decisions, actions, and failures to act have consequences… We affirm that a common set of core values is found in the teachings of the religions, and that these form the basis of a global ethic. We affirm that this truth is already known, but yet to be lived in heart and action… There already exist ancient guidelines for human behavior which are found in the teachings of the religions of the world and which are the condition for a sustainable world order.

To the question of whether the global ethic aims to unite all religions and faith systems or to leave them aside and develop a novel teaching, Dr. Küng responds as follows (Küng & Kuschel, 1995, p. 3):

> By global ethic we do not mean a world ideology, a new world religion different from the existing religions, or a mixture of existing religions. People are tired of homogenizing ideologies. World religions, on the other hand, are so different from each other in terms of principles of faith, dogmas, symbols and rules of worship that any attempt at unification is meaningless. The Jews have their Torah, Christians their Sermon on the Mount, Muslims their Quran, Buddhists Buddha's speeches, Confucianists Confucius' sayings… These will remain as the foundation of belief and living for hundreds of millions of people. A global ethic still needs to strive to find what is common in religions… In other words, a global ethic aims to identify the common ethical principles in religions.

➢ Establishing justice and a global ethic

All cultures develop norms and principles guiding behavior in the form of customs, habits, rules of behaviour and traditions. Religions and philosophies play an important role in the systematisation of these principles. However, in our multinational world, no religion, philosophy, or ideology is able to establish an ethic that covers an entire society. According to Dr. Küng, who discussed such a possibility, "*Individuals need to act together to chart an individual course, societies to keep their members together, and nations and religious groups to understand and cooperate with each other and to establish peace. Without establishing justice, there can be no talk of peace or a humane life*" (Küng, 1991, p. 105).

According to Küng, members of all nations and cultures can live together on the basis of "weltethos" (world ethic), and cooperate for a more just and peaceful world. In his 1990 book *Projekt Weltethos* (Project for a World Ethic), Küng argues

that what needs to be done is to come to a fundamental agreement on common values, inviolable principles and norms of personal behavior. The "Weltethos Declaration," the main document of the idea of a world ethic, is based on the following four assumptions (Aydın, 2008, p. 18):

- International peace is not possible without inter-faith peace.
- Inter-faith peace is not possible without inter-faith dialogue.
- Inter-faith dialogue is not possible without a global ethic.
- Life on earth is not sustainable in the absence of a global ethic, a world ethic commonly created by religious and non-religious people.

According to Küng, cultures, currents of thought and philosophies were born out of religions, and religion still serves as a common ground for ideas of justice, equality and human rights in our secularising world. Religion is the common denominator in these humanitarian structures, whether directly or indirectly, and regardless of race or culture. According to the Chicago Declaration, the common ethical ground among different religions rests on two principles (Bilici, Aksiyon Dergisi 2001:Issue 359):

1. Principle of humanism: Every human being must be treated humanely.
2. There is a second principle that results from the first principle and is found in all cultures and religions of humankind, the Golden Rule: *"What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others!"*

These two principles set forth concrete rules to govern four major areas of life (social, political, economic and cultural). The main principles accepted in the Chicago Declaration for establishing world peace can be summarised as follows:

> A global ethic is not a new ideology or a mixture of religions. A global ethic is based on common values accepted by all religions and secular ethical teachings. No one should be subjected to discrimination on the basis of their religion, color, thoughts, or gender. Every human being should be treated humanely. No one should do to others what they do not wish done to themselves. Racial, sexual, individual, or class-based, all sorts of egoism must be rejected. We have to adopt a non-violent culture that is respectful of life. The earth and all of its dwellers deserve respect just as humans do. There can be no global peace without a just economic order. We should wield economic and political power to establish peace, not superiority over others. We should value humility, not greed, which kills the human soul. The world cannot be made a better place without changing human consciousness first (Bilici, ibid: Issue 359).

According to Küng, all world religions and people have a responsibility to put this declaration into practice, so that it does not remain on paper. This project, which aims to create mutual respect, understanding and cooperation between people, to end conflicts between nations and religions, and thus to remove one of the major

obstacles to achieving world peace, lacks an enforcement mechanism, partially due to its operation at a global level, but it needs to be considered a product of the effort to create a better future for humankind and a significant development (Yavasgel, 2004, p. 136).

4. Dialogue

The meaning of dialogue changes from person to person and over time due to environmental and cultural factors. It is usually defined as "a conversation and exchange of opinion between two or more people with the hope of eventually reaching an understanding"(Macdonald, 1978; cited by Aydın 2008, p. 48). According to this definition, dialogue requires mutuality.

Within this framework, inter-faith dialogue can be defined as "communication between members of different faiths in order to minimize points of contention between the two and improve mutual relations"(Aydın 2008: 20). Dialogue is not a debate to be won. The goal in this process of communication is an exchange of information and development of new attitudes and behaviours. Thus, parties in a dialogue should listen to each other with an open mind, with the hope of learning new things, and make a serious effort to understand each other well. Given these considerations, another definition of inter-faith dialogue would be "a process of communication between people with different faiths, opinions or religious traditions to learn more about the Absolute Truth [Creator] and to learn from each other" (Aydın, 2008, p. 22).

John Hick argues that in today's pluralist world, we should not limit ourselves to the sources of our own religion in our effort to strengthen spiritual values. For that to happen, people entering a dialogue should respect and try to understand each other. Inter-faith dialogue can also be described as "communicating with the followers of other religious traditions in order to learn about their religious traditions, life styles, and how their faith affects humankind in general and their understanding of other faiths in particular, a communication conducted on the basis of mutual respect, understanding and trust, without aiming to eliminate differences but aiming to contribute to establishing a better world" (Aydın, 2008, p. 22).

> In the process of dialogue, everyone should be ready to listen to and accept the others as they are. We should listen [to our interlocutor] not to prepare our response, or to advocate our own religious faith or to attack theirs, but with a recognition that the religious figure of our own tradition [Jesus, Muhammad, Buddha…] is speaking though them. We should aim to appreciate what we hear [from our partner in the dialogue], not to belittle or despise. Thus, listening does not simply mean remaining physically silent and not talking, it means remaining silent on the inside by temporarily suspending our opinions and

beliefs so that we can achieve an understanding of our interlocutors as they understand themselves (Sharp, 1974; cited by Aydın, 2008, p. 26).

Inter-faith dialogue, summarised above, has been the subject of many academic studies since the 1960s, and there seems to be something of a consensus on the basic principles. These basic principles are as follows (Aydın, 2008, pp. 26–39):

- Dialogue aims for partners to listen to, learn from, and understand each other, to change, to make progress in the quest for understanding the Absolute Truth better, and to act accordingly.
- Dialogue should be perceived as a two-way means of communication within each religious tradition and between different religious traditions.
- Participants in a dialogue should bring complete honesty and sincerity to the table.
- In the process of dialogue, we should avoid comparing our ideals with our interlocutor's practices.
- In the process of dialogue, each participant should describe themselves and their faith.
- There should be complete equality between parties in a dialogue.
- Participants in a dialogue should be able - if only partially - to view themselves and their religious tradition from a critical perspective.
- Parties in a dialogue should be kind toward each other and show a genuine interest in the other party.
- Participants in a dialogue should act reasonably and appropriately toward one another.

The starting point for inter-faith dialogue through ***dialogical communication*** is to "contribute to the establishment of world peace." Another benefit of dialogue is that it may be able to generate new proposals for the solution of problems faced by humanity in a globalising world, problems such as hunger, discrimination, social and economic injustice, oppression and persecution, environmental pollution and violation of basic human rights.

5. In lieu of a conclusion

People, by creation, have common feelings. Many studies report that there are universal emotions, that no matter where they live, people react similarly to certain things. The need for faith, trust, protection, and attachment is part of what makes us human. In the world of the living, humans are unique in their ability to create systems of values (Serif, 1985, pp. 95–98). To prevent conflicts based on ethnic, cultural, and religious divisions, we should emphasise common sacred and humanitarian values on which there is broad consensus. Major world religions have a major responsibility in this respect. Their followers have to search for ways to re-establish and improve the dialogue between them (Ulsever, Milliyet Daily Newspaper, 15 April 2000). **After all, if religions are for humankind, they owe this to humanity.**

For ethics to be put into practice, we should strive for a new social order based on continuity, not conflict, between social identity and individual identity, and this requires the development of a novel understanding of reason, identity, and society. To this end, we should endeavour to carry qualities such as love, friendship and kindness, which are currently confined to the "feminine private sphere," into the "masculine public sphere" where instrumental reason currently dominates. "Now that our lives are technologically connected, similar connections should be formed at the affectual level as well. (…) I think the only thing that is worth worshipping is the fundamental spiritual reality that resides inside, beyond and behind the universe. To me, this fundamental reality is love"(Toynbee & Ikeda, 1992, p. 212).

It would be apt to conclude this treatment with a reference to the German thinker Immanuel Kant's idealism, which needs to be viewed as a political project to eliminate the contradiction that developed and was sustained between ethics and politics. In ***Perpetual Peace***, where he developed the concept of "just peace" to replace "just war," Kant examined the theoretical, political, and legal underpinnings of the ideal of universal and permanent peace, searching for ways to create a war-free world.

According to Kant, a prerequisite for achieving permanent peace is to act responsibly. We should try to solve moral problems underlying wars by developing goodwill and good morals. The United Nations, for example, is an international organisation founded after the Second World War to protect world peace, a goal largely reminiscent of Kant's ideal. However, wars waged and sustained by great powers despite the opposition of world public opinion require the development of a new global ethic for a new world order.

This is because "rationalist approaches and positive values, by themselves, are not enough; for a solution, they have to be accompanied by moral values" (Fukuyama, 1998, p. 18).

For contemporary democracy to be fully operational, social values and moral values have to be observed together. "Laws, contracts, economic rationality and industry are necessary but insufficient conditions for social prosperity and stability. Economic interests have to be accompanied by habitual mutual relationships, moral responsibilities and communal duties. These values have not gone out of fashion. To the contrary, they are indispensable for the success of the modern state" (Fukuyama, 1998, p. 23). To build a better future for humankind, we are in desperate need of taking confidence-building measures among societies in the twenty-first century.

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