

# **Ethics of Compassion and Human Liberation**

**Prof. Glen T Martin**



**World Constitution and Parliament Association  
India Chapter**

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## **Ethics of Compassion and Human Liberation**

Many writers on ethics point out that the Golden Rule is universally taught by all of the world's great religions. But ethics must go beyond a rule to do to others what you would have them do to you to a compassionate embrace of the suffering of others who happen to be victims of the immense structural violence and injustice of the world. The world system of militarized sovereign nation-states and vast inequalities of income, property and power makes the Golden Rule relatively meaningless at a global scale. Global ethics today requires not just the Golden Rule but compassion for the two billion citizens of earth who have virtually nothing, compassion for the millions of victims of immense violence perpetrated by the imperial nations of the world, led by the US, and compassion for future generations who are going to inherent hell on Earth unless we can bring climate collapse under control.

For these reasons, a holistic ethics of compassion is also an ethics of liberation that goes beyond the imagining of doing to others what I would want done to me to an envisioning of system-change. Ethics cannot be private morality alone (doing

as you would be done by) since the systems of Earth make us all guilty, all beneficiaries or victims (or both in different ways) of unjust planetary systems. As Albert Camus expressed this, we do not want to be either “victims or executioners.”

My compassionate identification with the victims of the current world systems (systems most notably identified as global capitalism and the system of warring nation-states) leads me to demand the transformation of these systems of injustice and exploitation to compassionate, inclusive systems of cooperation, sharing, and mutual participation. The ethics of holism under present conditions is creative and revolutionary holism: We are morally required to transform the systems of Earth to ones of justice, reasonable equality, respect for human dignity, and ecological sustainability.

Since nothing is excluded from the ethics of holism, it is clear that political life within democratic societies, international relations between nations, as well as economic and business relations, must be guided by ethical principles of holism and harmony. Harris compares the ethics of holism to the universal principle of love (agape) taught by Jesus: “Genuine rational love, therefore, must extend

to the entire human race.... Love of neighbor, in the full sense, transpires as love of the entire community and devotion to the ideal Kingdom of Ends” (1988: 163-64). Jesus taught the bringing of the Kingdom of God to Earth. Preparing the way for the kingdom of God means global system change. Dussel calls the present world system a “system of sin”:

In the totality of the systems of practices of the world, as objective and social reality, the “carnal” subject or agent desires the permanency of order, which, however, attempts to legitimate itself by appealing to the “gods” as its foundation. The “flesh” is idolatrized in the “kingdom of this world,” and promulgates its own law, its own morality, its own goodness.... This system is closed in upon itself. It has replaced the universal human project with its own particular historical project. Its laws become natural, its virtues perfect, and the blood of those who offer any resistance—the blood of the prophets and heroes—is spilled by the system as if it were the blood of the wicked, the totally subversive.... Essential to an ethics of liberation is a clear understanding of the starting point of the praxis of liberation. The starting point is sin, the world as a system of sin, the flesh as idolatrous desire, and a system that nevertheless is “moral,” having its own morality and a justified tranquil

conscience.... (1988: 30-31)

The system generates its own self-justifying ethics, its own conception of “natural” laws and virtues. These virtues normally include the golden rule as an ideal: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you while ignoring the fact that you participate in global systems of injustice and domination that make this impossible.” The ethics of holism requires critical analysis of systems of exploitation, hidden behind the “tranquil conscience” and self-justifying conventional morality of the dominant world order. The dominant world order generates “its own law” (so-called international law), “its own morality” (the naïve liberal idea that we can work within the system to evolve it toward greater justice), and “its own goodness” (e.g., the idea our military promotes and protects democracy worldwide).

Holism requires that critical social thought that was most clearly developed within the Marxist tradition. We do not want the illusion of holism (the false morality of the dominant system) but to establish real holistic systems of justice, dignity and freedom for the earth. Ethical holism is an ethics of liberation. The fact of global systems of violence, domination, and exploitation, exposed by those of critical integrity devoted to human

liberation, generates a corresponding insight into value: the system must be transformed into one premised on universal justice, dignity, and freedom. Fact and value reunite in the authentic quest for human liberation. Authentic holism is revolutionary holism. Küng writes:

In the past decades it has emerged more clearly than before that a religion can contribute not only to human oppression but also to human liberation: not only in psychological and psychotherapeutic terms, but also politically and socially. Here there is no longer propagation of a class morality (of a bourgeois stamp) of the kind that Marx and Engels rightly criticized in the last century; here—from Latin America to Korea, from South Africa to the Philippines, from East Germany to Rumania—there is a struggle for a humane society. (1991: 46)

Not only can religion embrace this new paradigm and the reintegration of fact and value, Kant taught that the social implication of the categorical imperative (that every person be treated as an end in themselves) is the ideal of the “Kingdom of Ends,” the ideal of a union of all human beings in a community of moral relationships. The ethical principle of the categorical imperative alone necessarily also gives us the social-political principle of

a universal, just human community. Harris (2005) is also stating that the ethics of holism, of rational love, implies the ideal of a moral world order of freedom, peace, justice, and harmony. To achieve this we must expose the lies of the self-justifying ideology of the current world system of sin. Küng states: “It has become abundantly clear why we need a new global ethic. For there can be no survival without a world ethic” (1991: 69).

A “world ethic” will by no means come from Christianity or Western thinkers alone. The work of such Eastern creative thinkers as Rabindranath Tagore (Martin, 2013b), Swami Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo is also fundamental. Insight into the interdependence of all being has long been a foundational theme of the great thinkers of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. As von Brück expresses this:

Thus ethics has its basis not in a forever grounded ought, but in a real transformation, which includes being aware of the interdependence of all being, and this, in turn, has consequences for their behavior towards the whole of nature... Two aspects which such a new experience has to include are the “autonomous worth of creatures” and the “interdependence of all beings.” If the

West represents especially the “autonomous worth of creatures,” Eastern thinking takes place in the context of the experience of interdependence. The dialogical community of the two could thus be important in working out our destiny. (1991: 273, 275-76)

Implicit in the new holistic paradigm is the vision of a cooperative and participatory world order in which war and exploitation have been abolished and replaced by peace, cooperation, rational love, and mutual economic and political efforts for the common good. And, indeed, it must be a world order, rather than one fragmented into autonomous warring economic and political units. The world of the early-modern paradigm, fragmented into conflicting national power interests and a multiplicity of conflicting economic interests, is gone forever from the most advanced conceptual and scientifically confirmable levels. A true world order emerges that has truly emergent properties due to its higher levels of wholeness and integration. It will become clear that such a “true world order” necessarily involves planetary unity-in-diversity through democratic world law. It necessarily involves ratification of the Constitution for the Federation of Earth.





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