

Ricœur on the (Im)Possibility of a Global Ethic Towards an Ethic of Fragile Interreligious Compromises

Marianne Moyaert

Faculty of Theology, St.-Michielsstraat 6, 3000 Leuven, Belgium,
marianne.moyaert@theo.kuleuven.be

Cultural and religious differences often lead to conflicts, which sometimes even degenerate into violence. According to some – I will refer to them here as universalists¹ – it is of vital importance to formulate a global ethic on which all the major streams of human culture concur.² Our globally interdependent world, so they argue, stands in need of an ethical perspective that transcends cultural and religious differences and “respects the conditions under which all people in the global community can live in dignity and freedom, without destroying each other’s chances of livelihood, culture, society and environment.”³ The case for such a global ethic is made especially within ecumenical circles, where it is claimed that it consists of nothing more than “the basic principles of right and wrong of human behavior and the ... principles to put them into action.”⁴ Such a shared moral consensus, so the argument goes, can result only from a worldwide dialogue among the religions and ideologies of the world.⁵ Especially in the last three decades of the past century several interreligious and intercultural organizations started to make serious efforts to promote such a dialogue.⁶ An important sign of the hope regarding the contribution

¹ Hans KÜNG, “Declaration of a Global Ethic”, in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 2 (1993), 101–113; Leonard SWIDLER/Paul MOJZES, *The Study of Religion in an Age of Global Dialogue* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000); Günther GEBHARDT, „Weltethos – Leitlinie eines handlungsorientierten interreligiösen Dialogs“, in Reinhold BERNHARDT/Perry SCHMIDT-LEUKEL (ed.), *Kriterien interreligiöser Urteilsbildung* (Beiträge zu einer Theologie der Religionen Band 1; Zürich: TVZ, 2005), 59–70.

² For a recent discussion on Ethics in an Era of Globalization see Ronald COMMERS/Wim VANDEKERCKHOVE/An VERLINDEN (ed.), *Ethics in an Era of Globalization* (Ashgate: Aldershot 2008).

³ Ervin LASZLO, *Macroshift: Navigating the Transformation to a Sustainable World* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2001), 78.

⁴ SWIDLER/MOJZES (cf. above, note 1), 180.

⁵ “On Global Ethics as Dialogism” see An VERLINDEN, *Global Ethics as Dialogism*, in *Ethics in an Era of Globalization*, COMMERS, VANDEKERCKHOVE/VERLINDEN (cf. above, note 2), 187–216.

⁶ ‘Organised international inter-religious activities began with the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago, 1893, followed in 1900 by the founding of the first permanent international inter-religious organization, known today as the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF). Then came the World Congress of Faiths (WCF) in 1936, the World Fellowship of Faiths in 1950 in India, The Temple of Understanding (ToU) in 1960, the World Conference on Religions and Peace (WCRP) in 1970, the Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions

religions can make here was the ambitious and large-scale interreligious encounter, organized in 1993, in the light of the hundredth anniversary of the first World's Parliament of Religions.⁷ "On 4 September 1993 this Parliament passed a 'Declaration toward a Global Ethic', in which people of very different religious backgrounds for the first time agreed on a minimum of irrevocable directives which they were already affirming in their own traditions."⁸ The Swiss Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Küng, was the driving force behind this project.

Others⁹ – whose voice has become increasingly louder in recent years – dismiss such a trans-cultural ethic as illusionary, saying that cultural diversity signifies the end of any claim to universality. There is no agreement across cultures and religions about what is universal. This particularist approach is based on the idea that each culture and religion "has its own

in 1988 (CPWR), the International Interfaith Centre (IIC) in 1993, the United Religions Initiative (URI) in 1996, the Interfaith Center of New York in 1997, the Worlds Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) in 1998, and the Millennium World Peace Summit in 2000, to name the more prominent and permanent ones' (Josef BOEHLE, "Interreligious Cooperation and Global Change: From a Clash of Civilisations to a Dialogue of Civilisations", in *Pacifica Review: Peace, Security and Global Change* 14 (2002), 227–234, 230. For an overview of the interreligious movement see Marcus BRAYBROOKE, *Pilgrimage of Hope. One Hundred Years of Global Interfaith Dialogue* (London SCM Press, 1992).

⁷ Interreligious dialogue is a recent phenomenon, which is usually identified as starting in 1893. In that year, Chicago celebrated the 400th birthday of Columbus' discovery of America by organizing a World Fair, which covered diverse domains such as science, literature, art, and education. The whole event exuded the sphere of the modern ideal of progress. Within the organizing committee it was asked if religion should not also be a part of this festive happening and this in the form of a 'World Parliament of Religions'. Not everybody was equally enthusiastic about this proposal – some feared that bringing together so many religions would lead to conflict. "Many felt that religion was an element of perpetual discord, which should not be trusted amid the magnificent harmonies of a fraternal assembly of the nations" (Barrows, Parliament, 5). However the conviction that the modern penchant for unity could also be realised in the religious domain was stronger than the sporadic opinions expressing distrust. It was this belief in the pervasiveness of unity that made the first interreligious gathering possible. The 'World's Parliament of Religions' was intended to be an interreligious encounter in the sphere of brotherhood, harmony, and cooperation. It brought together an immense diversity of religions including: Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Taoism, Confucianism, Jainism, Judaism, Catholicism, Christianity, and Islam. For a report on this historical interreligious gathering see John Henry BARROWS, *The World's Parliament of Religions. An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World's First Parliament of Religions Held in Connection with the Columbian Exposition in 1893*, Vol. 1, (Chicago: The Parliament Publishing Company, 1893). See also James KIRK, "The 1893 World's Parliament of Religions: In the Continuing Dialogue of World Religions", in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 2 (1993), 121–137.

⁸ KÜNG, "Will a Global Ethic Prevail?", in IDEM, *Yes to a Global Ethic* (London: SCM Press, 1996), 1–7, 2.

⁹ Stanley HAUERWAS, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics*, (Trinity University Monograph Series in Religion 3), (San Antonio, Texas: Trinity University Press, 1985); George LINDBECK, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984); Alasdair MCINTYRE, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

particular values and norms which are incommensurable with those of other cultures [and religions].”¹⁰ Religious and cultural diversity should simply be accepted. Particularists emphasize especially that all ethical outlooks are embedded in narrative and symbolic traditions. To a large extent, these traditions determine what is ‘good’ – what is considered important, valuable and worthy of pursuit.¹¹ The plurality of religions and cultures clearly point to a variety of moral visions and rationalities that are so particular that it is not possible to transcend the differences between them in order to find an essential common ethical framework.

Universalists object to particularism¹² because it could lead to moral relativism and even new forms of cultural *apartheid*. On their part, particularists point to the devaluation of cultures in the name of specious universal claims.¹³ According to them, moreover, behind the proposal of a global ethic lies a particular (usually Western) discourse. If this is not acknowledged, proposals for a global ethic become one more expression of ethnocentrism.

In a world where cultural conflicts are numerous, the discussion on the (im)possibility of a global ethic is urgent. “Are we forced to relativize our ideas about substantive human goods in order to preserve a necessary minimal respect for the diversity of human persons? Or should we abandon the effort to secure generalizable moral principles in order to reaffirm the particular contexts in which we can find human meaning and purpose?”¹⁴ Are universalism and particularism irreconcilable perspectives or can these positions be brought closer together?¹⁵

I will not repeat the discussion here between universalism and particularism as such. Rather, I want to shed new light on this discussion by turning to the French philosopher Paul Ricœur (1913–2005), one of the great minds of the twentieth century. Characteristic of Ricœur’s work is how he dealt with other thinkers and lines of thought. He never sought to engage in polemics but tried, rather, to engage seemingly unbridgeable positions

¹⁰ Richard EVANOFF, “Universalist, Relativist and Constructivist Approaches to Intercultural Ethics”, in *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 28 (2004), 439–458, 439.

¹¹ Marianne MOYAERT, “Religion in the Public Arena: Recognition, Vulnerability and Tragedy”, in *Ethical Perspectives* 16 (2009), 283–309, 286.

¹² This discussion shows affinity with the discussion between liberalism (Rawls) and communitarianism (Taylor, Walzer, Sandel), which can be regarded as exemplars of universalism and particularism. See David KAPLAN, *Reading Ricœur* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 212.

¹³ Timothy GÖRRINGE, *Furthering Humanity: A Theology of Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 215.

¹⁴ John WALL, “The Economy of the Gift: Paul Ricœur Significance for Theological Ethics”, in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 29 (2001), 235–260, 238.

¹⁵ Marianne MOYAERT, “Interreligious Dialogue and the Debate between Universalism and Particularism. Searching for a Way out of the Deadlock”, in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 15 (2005), 36–51.

or thinkers in a fruitful dialogue. That is why Ricœur is rightly called the philosopher of all dialogues.¹⁶

Schwerlich findet man einen Denker, der in vergleichbar positiver Weise auf andere Positionen und Denk- oder auch Textbewegungen bezogen ist: Denn das Außergewöhnliche des Ricœur'schen Denkens besteht darin, dass er sich mit fremden Positionen stets in einer Weise aus-einander setzt, die die Stärke der anderen Denkansätze herausarbeitet, um diese zu relevanten Gegenpolen für seinen eigenen Ausgangspunkt werden zu lassen, zu Gegenpolen, die die je erreichten Positionen seines eigenen Denkens erschüttern können und dieses so in einer unaufhörlichen Bewegung halten.¹⁷

Ricœur is relentlessly searching for a middle ground while acknowledging that the latter will always be *fragile*. It is precisely his thoughtful hospitality that will prove to be very fruitful in view of the discussion on the (im)possibility of a global ethic.

Ricœur's thought covers a wide range of subjects, including existentialism, phenomenology, philosophical anthropology, moral philosophy, ontology, biblical hermeneutics, narrative theory, critical theory, and philosophy of action.¹⁸ In this article I am especially interested in Ricœur's ethical insights into the tension between universalism and particularism. His contribution here is far from obvious, since he only occasionally touched on the question of the possibility of a global ethic.¹⁹ He certainly did not elaborate on this question systematically. Still, Ricœur's 'fragmentary reflections' on the (im)possibility of a global ethic can be deepened by looking at them together and from the perspective of his moral philosophy. In this regard, especially his so-called *little ethics* (studies 7–9 in his magnum opus *Oneself as Another*) deserves our attention.²⁰ Here he develops "philosophical anthropology that has ethics as its goal" and that acknowledges "human pluralism while trying to maintain universality."²¹ Although Ricœur endorses some of the particularistic criticisms of a global ethic, he also holds on to the importance of a universal ethical perspective. He suggests a uniquely fruitful way to integrate the universalist and particularist perspectives on religious and cultural diversity, thereby constructing an argument for practical wisdom. From this perspective, Ricœur's ethical reflec-

¹⁶ Leovino GARCIA, "On Paul Ricœur and the Translation-Interpretation of Cultures", in *Thesis Eleven* 94 (2008), 72–78, 72.

¹⁷ Jens Matern, *Zwischen kultureller Symbolik und allgemeiner Wahrheit* (Nordhausen: Traugott Bautz, 2008), 10.

¹⁸ KAPLAN (cf. above, note 12), 2.

¹⁹ Hans KÜNG/Paul RICŒUR, "Les religions, la violence et la paix. Pour une éthique planétaire. Entretien H. Küng – P. Ricœur" [autour du livre de H. KÜNG, *Manifeste pour une éthique planétaire*], in *Sens (Inlassables dialogues)* 5 (1998), 211–230.

²⁰ RICŒUR, *Oneself as Another*, transl. by Kathleen BLAMEY (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

²¹ Patricia ALTENBERND JOHNSON, "Review. Paul Ricœur. *Reflections on the Just*", transl. by David Pellauer, in *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 64 (2008), 55–57, 56.

tions, properly understood, provide new resources for addressing the fundamental discussion on the (im)possibility of a global ethic.

My starting point is Ricœur's discussion with Hans Küng on the 'Declaration Toward a Global Ethic'.²² This discussion is not very well known and has, to my knowledge, not been commented upon by a third party. It is, moreover, one of the rare occasions on which Ricœur elaborates on the possibility of a global ethic. In this discussion Ricœur immediately signals his "inner resistance" to Küng's project.²³ Ricœur, like Küng, is concerned with interreligious and intercultural conflict, but he is not convinced that a global ethic is the appropriate response. After having explored his main objections to Küng's project, I will then examine how Ricœur develops, on the basis of his 'little ethics', an original perspective concerning the contemporary challenge of ethical diversity and the tension between particularity and universality.

In unpacking and analyzing Ricœur's ethical reflections and elaborating on them in view of the context of diversity, I hope not only to argue how this Ricœurian perspective sheds new light on the discussion concerning the (im)possibility of a global ethic but also to contribute in a very specific way to Ricœur studies. In this sense, the following article can also be read as an intercultural or interreligious appropriation of Ricœur's ethical reflections.

I. Küng's Global Ethic

One of the pioneers of the 'Declaration Toward a Global Ethic' was Hans Küng, the former director of the Institute of Ecumenical Research at the University of Tübingen. Küng depicts the current situation of our world in terms of crisis, citing unemployment, poverty, hunger, political and economic corruption, and a variety of social, racial, ethnic, and religious conflicts. To make this situation even more dramatic, Küng notes that to this day religions are, more often than not, a dividing factor between people. Leaders and members of religions often "incite aggression, fanaticism, hate, and xenophobia – even inspire and legitimize violent and bloody conflicts."²⁴ From this perspective, Küng expresses his ecumenical conviction that there will be "no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions."²⁵ This interreligious dialogue should focus on finding agreement on certain fundamental issues, such as global justice and peace, and world problems such as violence, global warming and famine. The

²² KÜNG/RICŒUR, (cf. above, note 19).

²³ *Ibid.*, 211.

²⁴ KÜNG, "Declaration" (cf. above, note 1), 103.

²⁵ KÜNG, *Projekt Weltethos* (München: Piper Verlag, 1990), 171.

search for common moral principles is, according to Küng, vitally important for the peaceful survival of humankind. Without such a moral consensus, Küng argued, the human community will sink into despair and chaos.²⁶

In 1990 Küng published his *Projekt Weltethos*, in which he articulates a utopia of global responsibility among nations and religions. In line with Küng's vision, on 4 September 1993, the World Parliament of Religions accepted a 'Declaration Toward a Global Ethic'. It was the result of "extensive interreligious debate and consultation"²⁷ and it was signed by most of the nearly two hundred 'delegates' of the world's religions who attended the World Parliament of Religions.

By a global ethic we do not mean a global ideology or a single unified religion beyond all existing religions, and certainly not one religion over all others. By a global ethic we mean a fundamental consensus on binding values, irrevocable standards and personal attitudes.²⁸

This statement reflects a minimal moral consensus among the world's religious and cultural traditions.²⁹ Though Küng acknowledges "that various religious and ethical traditions often offer very different bases of what is helpful and what is unhelpful for men and women, what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil,"³⁰ he is convinced that these differences "should not hinder us from proclaiming *those things which we already hold in common and which we jointly affirm*. An ethic already exists within the religious teachings of the world which can counter the global distress."³¹ From this perspective, Küng claims that such a global ethic is not a form of *Hineininterpretierung*; rather, it simply links up with an already existing moral consensus. "It is not a new invention but only a new discovery."³² In the end, this global ethic merely makes "known what religions in West and East, North and South already hold in common."³³

The declaration is grounded in the fundamental affirmation of the inalienable and untouchable dignity of every human person, from which the fundamental equality of all human beings is also derived. Specific to this foundation is that the differences between people are not taken into consideration. People are approached simply as human beings, i.e. without taking into account gender, race, origin, appearance, birth, religion, or cul-

²⁶ KÜNG, "Declaration" (cf. above, note 1), 103.

²⁷ Sallie KING, "A Global Ethic in the Light of Comparative Religious Ethics", in Sumner TWISS/Bruce GRELL (ed.), *Explorations in Global Ethics. Comparative Ethics and Interreligious Dialogue* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 118–140, 119.

²⁸ KÜNG, "Declaration" (cf. above, note 1), 104–105.

²⁹ KÜNG, "Will a Global Ethic Prevail?" (cf. above, note 8), 2.

³⁰ KÜNG, "Declaration" (cf. above, note 1), 105.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Hans KÜNG/Karl-Josef KUSCHEL, *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of World's Religions* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 8.

³³ KÜNG, "Will a Global Ethic Prevail?" (cf. above, note 8), 2.

ture. According to Küng "Every person – young or old, male or female, Christian, Jew or Muslima, challenged or not challenged – will be treated humanely and not inhumanely – the *humanum* is indivisible.³⁴ All people are equal as *human beings* and thus all are worthy of respect. Human dignity therefore implies an ethical imperative for equal treatment.³⁵ Every human being must be treated humanely – this follows from his or her human dignity – without distinction according to age, sex, race, religion, ethnicity, or political conviction. The conditions should be created under which *all* people can live in dignity. "The individual as well as the state, is therefore obliged to honor this dignity and protect it. Humans must always be the subjects of rights, must be ends, never mere means, never objects of commercialization and industrialization in economics, politics and media, in research institutes, and industrial corporations."³⁶

This *humanum* is affirmed in all religious traditions in what is often called the golden rule: "What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others."³⁷ This golden rule is one of the most widely recognized principles of morality.³⁸ Because it crosses so many traditions, it possesses, according to Küng, tremendous moral authority and reveals a profound unity underlying the diversity of human experience. Therefore, it forms the principal cornerstone of the 'Declaration Towards a Global Ethic'.

But what does it mean to treat people *humanely*? The declaration of a global ethic answers this question with four *broad, ancient, moral principles* that can also be found in most religions of the world.

³⁴ KÜNG, *Das Humanum ist unteilbar*, Festvortrag von Prof. Dr. Hans Küng bei der Veranstaltung "Perspektive stiften für Mensch, Ethik und Wissenschaft", 22 April 2004, im Haus Würth, Berlin.

³⁵ Roger Burggraeve, "Mensenrechten: een kwestie van gelijkheid en verschil", in Johan DE TAVERNIER/Didier POLLEFEYT, (ed.), *Heeft de traditie van de mensenrechten toekomst?* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 89–94.

³⁶ Hans KÜNG/Helmut SCHMIDT (ed.), *A Global Ethic and Global Responsibilities. Two Declarations* (London: SCM Press, 1998), 13. In this regard the 'Declaration Towards a Global Ethic' tallies with the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights'. Thus Küng: "We are convinced of the fundamental unity of the human family. Therefore, we recall to mind the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. What it formally proclaimed on the level of rights we wish to confirm and deepen here from the perspective of an ethic: The full realization of the intrinsic dignity of the human person, of inalienable freedom, of the equality in principle of all humans, and the necessary solidarity of all humans with each other" KÜNG (cf. above, note 1), 101. This follows the same line as the Kantian concept of person, which is finally a delimiting concept. Kant defines the person as a goal in and of itself, in the sense that the human in me and others – all others – can never be treated purely as a mean. In this respect the modern human rights tradition, which seeks its foundation in the equality of human people – regardless of all differences – has affinity with Kant see Burggraeve (cf. above, note 35), 89–90.

³⁷ KÜNG, "Declaration" (cf. above, note 1), 106.

³⁸ KÜNG, *The History, Significance and Method of the Declaration Toward a Global Ethic*, in KÜNG/SCHMIDT (ed.) (cf. above, note 36), 53.

The Declaration calls for commitment to (1) "a culture of non-violence and respect for life" ("You shall not kill!"), (2) "a culture of solidarity and a just economic order" ("You shall not steal!"), (3) "a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness" ("You shall not lie!"), and "a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women" ("You shall not commit sexual immorality!").³⁹

The proposed global ethic is not intended to replace the existing ethical systems of the various religious traditions. Rather, it is a minimal base that the various religious traditions and their ethical systems should further elaborate and supplement. It claims to supply the moral foundation for a better individual and global order, leading "women and men away from despair, and society away from chaos."⁴⁰

Even in the future, the global ethic cannot replace, say the Torah of the Jews, the Christian Sermon on the Mount, the Muslim Qu'ran, the Hindu Bhagavadgita, the Discourses of Buddha or the Sayings of Confucius. How could anyone come to think that the different religions wanted to avoid the foundation of their faith and life, thought and actions. These sacred scriptures offer as it were a maximal ethic, compared with which the Declaration Toward a Global Ethic can offer only a minimal ethic.⁴¹

II. Ricoeur's Objections to the "Declaration Towards a Global Ethic"

Like Küng, Ricoeur was struck by the fact that *to this day* people continue to kill 'in the name of God'. In light of this dramatic reality, it is, according to Ricoeur, of the greatest importance that believers from different religious traditions find a way to live with one another. The challenge for Ricoeur is how to "promote a culture of mutual recognition which is not limited to a deadly struggle, allowing only one victor."⁴² Still, in his discussion with Küng, Ricoeur immediately voiced his position regarding the project of a global ethic: "Because of a profound complicity I am more sensitive to the obstacles; I would even say that I have a certain inner resistance to this project."⁴³ Ricoeur formulated several objections. In view of the central theme of this article, i.e. the tension between universality and particularity, two of Ricoeur's objections deserve special attention.

First, Ricoeur states that the global ethic amounts to a "disembodied formalism" because it is founded on too radical a distinction between uni-

³⁹ KÜNG, "Declaration" (cf. above, note 1), 106–112, in Peggy MORGAN/Marcus BRAY-BROOKE (ed), *Testing a Global Ethic: Voices from the Religions on Moral Values* (Oxford: International Interface Centre, 1998). Peggy Morgan and Marcus Braybrooke show that these four broad, ancient guidelines can be found in all the world.

⁴⁰ KÜNG/KUSCHEL, (cf. above, note 32), 12.

⁴¹ Ibid., 73.

⁴² Jean GREISCH, "Vers quelle reconnaissance?", in *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 50 (2006), 149–172, 149.

⁴³ KÜNG/RICOEUR, (cf. above, note 19), 212.

versal *formal* norms and particular religious convictions.⁴⁴ Küng himself is convinced that “one should leave aside the fact that in the theoretical domain of faith and doctrine, many differences, even conflicts exist.”⁴⁵ Instead of focusing on differing theoretical *doctrinal* levels, Küng holds that interreligious dialogue should rather bring into focus “the practical *ethical* level of concrete behavior ‘how should I treat my neighbor?’”⁴⁶ On that level, several moral principles already exist that can be affirmed by all people, *despite* their cultural and/or religious background. Küng regrets that all too often this already existing moral consensus is “obscured by numerous ‘dogmatic’ disputes and intolerable self-opinionatedness.”⁴⁷ That explains his conviction that successful interreligious dialogue requires that conflicting interreligious beliefs be bracketed.

Ricœur thinks that this approach is problematic and views Küng’s global ethic as a negative abstraction. In an attempt to transcend interreligious doctrinal differences, this project has disassociated the ‘universal norms’ it has identified from their particular religious origins. Küng ignores the fact that the moral principles as formulated in his global ethic, such as ‘you shall not lie’ or ‘you shall not kill’ as well as the fundamental respect for the other person, are always embedded in a particular religious framework that is constitutive for ethical valuations. To quote Ricœur:

At stake is the intersection of religion and ethics, because for the Christian to say ‘you shall not kill’ is fundamental to recognizing the specificity of Christ’s sacrifice, because he is the victim *par excellence*. I am reminded here of what Pascal said, *For you I have shed my blood*. Here it is a Christian word that says ‘you shall not kill’ in the language of a Christianity.⁴⁸

Ricœur does not deny that interreligious conflicts often take place at the level of religious convictions. To the contrary: he readily admits that it is in and through such convictions that conflicts are introduced into the discussion.⁴⁹ However, Ricœur believes that separating these principles from their “support, accompaniment, and if I may, their founding religious energy and inspiration” gives way to a “poor morality.”⁵⁰

Ricœur’s second objection is also connected with the formalistic nature of the global ethic. Not only is Küng’s moral consensus abstract because it is disconnected from any religious foundation, but it also neglects the challenge posed by the application of these formal principles to the ethical complexities with which people are confronted in life. It is one thing to reach a consensus regarding minimal moral rules, such as ‘you shall not kill’, but

⁴⁴ KÜNG/RICŒUR, (cf. above, note 19), 218.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 217.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 216.

⁴⁷ KÜNG, “Will a Global Ethic Prevail?” (cf. above, note 8), 2.

⁴⁸ KÜNG/RICŒUR, (cf. above, note 19), 217.

⁴⁹ RICŒUR, *Oneself* (cf. above, note 20), 111.

⁵⁰ KÜNG/RICŒUR, (cf. above, note 19), 217.

what does this mean with regard to euthanasia, abortion, defending one's nation, owning guns, etc.? Moreover, Riccœur predicts that during the translation process of these formal principles to concrete reality, conflicts will once again arise. Küng does recognize this problem. He even acknowledges that the 'Declaration Towards a Global Ethic' consciously avoids these complex ethical issues because it is supposed to be capable of producing a consensus. "Statements ... which a priori would be rejected by one of the great religions and as a consequence disputed moral questions (like abortion or euthanasia) had to be excluded."⁵¹ Riccœur finds this too 'easy', referring in this context to Karl Jaspers who stated that it is better to engage in a "loving combat" than to reconcile oneself too quickly to an "easy understanding."⁵²

III. After Babel

Riccœur's criticisms can easily be misunderstood and interpreted as denying any possibility of universal ethical claims. Riccœur can thus be seen as a postmodern thinker who praises difference for the sake of difference.⁵³ This is not Riccœur's position. On the contrary, in this era of global civilization Riccœur was convinced more than ever that humanity stands in need of an ethics of universal scope.

We are doubtless the first historical epoch to include as a dominant fact the consciousness of belonging to a single global civilization, to experience ourselves as a single humanity which enlarges its capital, its instruments and means of working, living and thinking.⁵⁴

As a philosopher of dialogue and reconciliation, he acknowledged human pluralism while trying to maintain universality.⁵⁵ Universality, however, is not the same as homogeneity of beliefs, and there should certainly be no attempt to eliminate the conflict of interpretations. Due to the intertwinement of the particular and the universal, which is a corollary of the human condition *after Babel*, conflicts will persist. Let me further elaborate on this thought.

On one hand, we speak about *humanity* in the singular.⁵⁶ On the other hand, humanity exists only as fragmented – into populations, ethnici-

⁵¹ KÜNG, "Explanatory remarks concerning a 'Declaration of the religions for a Global Ethic'", See: <http://astro.ocis.temple.edu/>.

⁵² KÜNG/RICCŒUR, (cf. above, note 19), 221.

⁵³ Jean-Pierre CHANGEUX/Paul RICCŒUR, *What Makes Us Think? A Neuroscientist and a Philosopher Argue about Ethics, Human Nature, and the Brain* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 276.

⁵⁴ RICCŒUR, "The Task of the Political Educator", in IDEM, *Political and Social Essays*, coll. and ed. by David STEWART, (Athens: Athens University Press, 1976), 271–293, 274.

⁵⁵ ALTENBERND JOHNSON, (cf. above, note 21), 56.

⁵⁶ RICCŒUR, "Cultures: du deuil à la traduction", in *Le monde* (May 25th, 2004), 18–19, 18.

ties, cultures, historical communities, belief systems, and religions.⁵⁷ Humanity is irreducibly plural,⁵⁸ and plurality proves to be inherent to the question of universality. It becomes clear especially when we explore ethics that “humanity has played out its destiny in a diversity of languages, a diversity of moral experiences and a diversity of spiritualities and religions.”⁵⁹ Ricœur sees the reality of cultural, religious, and moral diversity as an embarrassment.

The question is: “What meaning can we give to humanity under its double figure of the *human* – what is human and what is inhuman – but also as a group of people, as multiplicity and thus as plurality.”⁶⁰ Because of the *post-Babel* condition of humankind, the “universalism for which we argue can only be coextensive with a more or less controlled plurality.”⁶¹ Any legitimate form of universality must always find its equivalent plurality.⁶² The tension between the universal and the particular can never be solved, and conflicts will always persist. Instead of striving for moral *consensus*, Ricœur argues for an ethic of fragile compromises. He claims that the notion of ‘universality in context’, ‘potential universality’, or ‘inchoate universal’ best accounts for such an ethic of compromise.

In the following I will further elaborate Ricœur’s argument for an ethic of compromise by connecting his thoughtful insights on the (im)possibility of a global ethic with his so-called ‘little ethics’. Although Ricœur did not reflect on his ‘little ethics’ within an interreligious context, it both illuminates his objections to Küng’s project and clarifies his ethic of compromise. It will become clear that Ricœur thus provides new resources for transcending the tension between universalism and particularism on the question if a global ethic is possible.

IV. Ricœur’s ‘little ethics’: between particularism and universalism

Ricœur balances between a universal ethics that downplays the importance of particular religious convictions and a cultural relativism that denies the sieve of the norm. Basic to his little ethics is the distinction he makes between morality and ethics. Ricœur readily admits that there are

⁵⁷ RICŒUR, “Introduction”, in IDEM, *Reflections on the Just*, transl. by David PELLAUER, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1–41, 25.

⁵⁸ RICŒUR, “The Task of Political Education” (cf. above, note 54), 281.

⁵⁹ RICŒUR, “Introduction”, in IDEM, *Les cultures et le temps. Au carrefour des cultures. Études préparées pour l’Unesco* (Paris: Payot, 1975), 19–42, 19.

⁶⁰ RICŒUR, “Cultures” (cf. above, note 56), 18.

⁶¹ CHANGEUX/RICŒUR, (cf. above, note 53), 210.

⁶² Richard KEARNEY, “Introduction. Ricœur’s Philosophy of Translation”, in Paul RICŒUR, *On Translation (Thinking in Action)*, transl. by Eileen BRENNAN, (London: Routledge, 2004), vii–xx.

no etymological or historical grounds for this distinction. The first term derives from Greek, and the latter from Latin. Both refer to the notion of customs (*ethos*, *mores*).

Nevertheless, Ricœur connects the notion of morality with the area of norms, in other words, with the formal principles concerning what is permitted and what prohibited. As I will show, this is where Kung's global ethic is situated. Ricœur sees the term 'ethics' as splitting into two: "one branch designating something like the upstream side of norms" – Ricœur speaks of *anterior ethics* – "and the other branch designating something like the downstream side" – he calls this *posterior ethics*.⁶³ Within this differentiated concept of ethics, anterior ethics points to the embeddedness of norms in particular visions of the good life, whereas posterior ethics aims at inserting norms into concrete situations. Ethics is set in the historico-cultural realm. Morality claims to transcend historical and cultural roots. Thus, ethics and morality refer to particularity and universality respectively.

Ricœur's 'little ethics' revolves around the question: How is morality related to ethics with regard to this twofold understanding? His study of this relationship sheds further light on his objections to Kung's project. Ricœur's first objection – that the universal formal principles are detached from their particular religious embeddedness – connects with what he calls the *upstream side of morality*. His second objection – that Kung ignores the challenge of inserting these formal norms into historico-cultural situations – relates to the *downstream side of morality*. Over against Kung and in line with the Babelian human condition, Ricœur emphasizes the inescapable intertwinement of the particular and the universal, leading him to an ethical outlook in which the strength of both ethics and morality are revealed and in which they strengthen and enrich each other.⁶⁴

Ricœur defends three main theses that tie morality and ethics dialectically to each other:

1. The primacy of anterior ethics over morality (upstream side of morality),
2. the necessity for the ethical aim to pass through the sieve of the norm,

3. the legitimacy of turning from the norm to the aim when the norm leads to conflicts from which there is no other recourse than a practical wisdom that returns to that which, in the ethical aim, is most attentive to the singularity of situations (downstream side of morality).⁶⁵

⁶³ RICŒUR, "From the Moral to the Ethical and to Ethics", in IDEM, *Reflections on the Just* (cf. above, note 57), 45–71, 46.

⁶⁴ RICŒUR, *Oneself* (cf. above, note 20), 171.

⁶⁵ RICŒUR, "Éthique et morale", in *Revue de l'Institut Catholique de Paris* 34 (1990), 131–142, 131.

IV.1. *From the Particular to the Universal: The Upstream Side of Norms*

In his anterior ethics – which he also designates as fundamental ethics as distinguished from the applied (posterior) ethics – Ricœur turns to the Aristotelian concept of the good life as the very object of ethics. Ethics is concrete. It aims at happiness or the realization of the good life. The starting point of Aristotle's ethics is not the question of what should we do but rather what do I desire (ultimately)? According to Aristotle, the answer to this question is *eudaimonia*: "the wish for some desirable accomplishment in our private lives as well as in our life together, popularly known as happiness."⁶⁶ Desire precedes law, and intention precedes the norm. Continuing this teleological approach, Ricœur defines "ethical intention as aiming at the good life with and *for others* in just institutions."⁶⁷ With this definition Ricœur rejects the idea that the desire to live a good life would be merely solipsistic or even narcissistic. The concern for others is already implied in the desire.

Desire is always embedded in tradition: narratives, rules, ritual forms, and symbols mediate *and* mold the way the good life takes shape. Ricœur speaks in this regard of the roads leading to the good life. He designates these roads as ultimate frameworks of legitimation. We could also call them the ethical horizon in terms of which a person or group views the world. These frameworks are fundamental to the development of an examined ethical life. Not only do they mold human dispositions by incorporating the standards for ethical behavior, they also orient ethical judgments. To be able to discriminate in an ethical way presumes a certain hierarchization of *goods*. "Evaluation is a matter of contrasting the good and the less good, of saying this is better than that."⁶⁸ Some aspirations are judged to be good and some bad; some desires are honorable and others shameful; some actions compel admiration and others indignation. These evaluations give a moral stamp to our desires, inclinations and reactions. People determine the worth of their lives against the background of what is highly esteemed within a particular framework.

Religious and cultural traditions function as ultimate frameworks of legitimation. Anteriority and superiority are both characteristic of these traditions, twice affirming the heteronymous origin of ethical life. One does not choose to adhere to this or that tradition; it is rather something into which one is born. It precedes autonomous choice. In any case, it does not depend on our will "that values outline a certain order, a certain hierarchy.

⁶⁶ RICŒUR, "The Universal and the Historical" in IDEM, *Reflections on the Just*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press), 2007, 233.

⁶⁷ RICŒUR, *Oneself* (cf. above, note 20), 172.

⁶⁸ CHANGEUX/RICŒUR, (cf. above, note 53), 196.

It seems that values can only orient because they are discovered not created.”⁶⁹

Moreover, and Ricœur readily admits that this is not unproblematic, the preceding tradition also has a certain authority: the authority of the past. Here dependence again receives a positive value; “the superiority of a certain teaching is presumed, because it is old, or ancient, or even archaic.”⁷⁰ The relation between tradition and a moral agent is analogous to that of a teacher and a student. It is asymmetrical.

None of us finds himself placed in the radical position of creating the ethical world *ex nihilo*. It is an inescapable aspect of our finite condition that we are born into a world already qualified in an ethical manner by the decisions of our predecessors, by the living culture ... and by the reflections of wise and experienced men. In brief we are always already preceded by evaluations beginning from which even doubt and our contestation becomes possible.⁷¹

When looking at the upstream level of ethical life, it already becomes clear that both the universal and the historical dimensions are intertwined.⁷² On the one hand, all human beings aim towards living the good life. It is one of the basic aspirations of human beings to be connected to what is good. On the other hand, Ricœur affirms that ultimate frameworks of legitimation are always historically and culturally determined. “Each historical group has an ethos, an ethical singularity, which is a power of creation linked to a tradition, to a memory, to an archaic rooting... Nowhere in fact can we discover a universal ethos.”⁷³ It is a fact of life that several conceptions of the good life are in competition because multiple frameworks or systems of ultimate legitimation exist.⁷⁴ This is where the origin of interreligious *ethical* conflicts is found. Though there are certainly similarities or points of agreement between the different religions regarding what is ethically important, different hierarchizations persist. It is clear that when it comes to defining goods, religions do not always point in the same direction. At this level, the link between particularity and conflict is blindingly obvious. “The question how ought we to live opens up a field of conflict as soon as our choices call for justification.”⁷⁵

Ricœur disagrees with Küng in that the latter seems to believe that it is both possible and meaningful to bracket these particular religious traditions in view of a moral consensus. Ricœur claims, first of all, that it is impossi-

⁶⁹ Ricœur, “Ethics and Culture: Habermas and Gadamer in Dialogue”, in IDEM, *Political and Social Essays* (cf. above, note 54), 246.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 268.

⁷² RICŒUR, “Practical Reason”, in IDEM, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics 2* (Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy) (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 2007, 188–207, 200.

⁷³ RICŒUR, “The Task of the Political Educator” (cf. above, note 54), 281.

⁷⁴ CHANGEUX/RICŒUR, (cf. above, note 53), 258.

⁷⁵ RICŒUR, “The Fundamental and the Historical: Notes on Charles Taylor’s Sources of the Self”, in IDEM, *Reflections on the Just* (cf. above, note 57), 183.

ble simply to extract ourselves from our ultimate framework of legitimation. Furthermore, he points out the impossibility of relating to our ultimate framework in such a way that it becomes an object. We must admit that we are always situated in such a way that our consciousness does not have the freedom to bring itself face to face with the ethical framework that orients us.⁷⁶ Moreover, he also finds 'abstraction' not very meaningful. Unlike Küng, for Ricœur the possibility of interreligious discordance is not the primary concern when reflecting on the plurality of religious traditions. The plurality of religious frameworks should not be reduced to sources of conflict; they should also be appreciated as rich ethical sources that together can mould the *human* desire for the good life.

Ricœur, as always, prefers the long route of multiple hermeneutical detours. Instead of aiming directly at a consensus deprived of its embedding in moral, customs, and practices, he is more interested in the different roads leading to a consensus. These different roads should be included in an in-depth dialogue. Whereas Küng reaches his minimal moral consensus by placing the different ethical frameworks and the existing interreligious conflicts between brackets, Ricœur holds that these differences are primary. When entering into a dialogue with other religious traditions, Ricœur is searching for insight, by means of a hermeneutical in-depth reflection on the traditions, that forms the ethical horizon of action in the broad meaning of the word. He challenges Küng not to formulate an easy consensus but rather to understand what separates us through sympathy and imagination.

We could have a very interesting discussion on non-violence, precisely because the principle of non-violence is understood differently in Buddhism and the monotheistic traditions.⁷⁷

The same is true for the notion of human dignity. Religions are agreed on this basic moral value perhaps, but should we not first ask: "What legitimizes our idea that persons are unsubstitutable, irreplaceable?"⁷⁸ According to Ricœur, interreligious dialogue should focus on different systems of legitimation and examine the divergent sources of belief.

IV.2. *The Sieve of the Norm*

Although all human beings, despite their particular commitments, are driven by the aspiration to live a good life, human aspirations are not always good. There is the danger that the human pursuit of happiness may be derailed, with negative consequences for others. This too is a universal fact. In view of cultural and religious plurality, this derailment can take a

⁷⁶ RICŒUR, "Ethics and Culture: Habermas and Gadamer in Dialogue" (cf. above, note 69), 252.

⁷⁷ KÜNG/RICŒUR, (cf. above, note 19), 221.

⁷⁸ CHANGEUX/RICŒUR, (cf. above, note 53), 258.

tragic turn when different visions of the good clash and give way to violence. Moreover, our history of racism, tribalism, and xenophobia proves the importance of passing through the sieve of the norm. Without this critical test, ultimate frameworks of legitimation always run the risk of degenerating into systems of violent exclusion. "These kinds of violence harm individuals as well as the institutions that are the framework for life in society. And the spirit of vengeance tends to add more violence to this violence in an endless chain."⁷⁹

Ricœur claims that a critical assessment of ethical frameworks and their goods is necessary because of this tragic possibility. Such a critical assessment is essentially expressed in the demand of universality. And the demand for universality can only take the form of a formal rule that does not say what one should do but rather defines the criteria to which one should subsume the maxims of action.⁸⁰ Kant's categorical imperative, which is actually a further formalization of the golden rule, sets the example. "act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law."⁸¹

What we regard as good and the decisions we make in order to realize this good, should pass through the sieve of the norm. In the face of the many expressions of evil, morality reacts by formulating prohibitions: you shall not kill, lie, or steal.⁸² Here a shift takes place from the concrete to the formal, from the particular to the universal, from intention to reason. Here we enter the realm of what Ricœur calls morality. Morality determines what individuals, when confronted with one another, can expect and demand from one another, and what they can and cannot do.

Ricœur does not place morality over against the aspiration to the good life. "It is not about substituting the concrete ethical aims by moral norms, the outset is rather to assess the defensibility of concrete ethical aims by means of moral norms."⁸³ The willingness to pass through the sieve of the norm is an expression of this aspiration. If desire precedes law, law orients desire in such a way that the latter can flourish. Law does not merely curtail: it also further orients human behavior through its interwoven ethics. Law responds to the wish to live well and gives further shape to the desire to live a good life.

⁷⁹ RICŒUR, (cf. above, note 66), 236.

⁸⁰ RICŒUR, (cf. above, note 65), 136.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 136.

⁸³ Bernard DAUENHAUER, *Paul Ricœur. The Promise and Risk of Politics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield 1998), 162.

IV.3. *The Downstream of Morality: Practical Wisdom*

According to some philosophers, the spectacle within the competition of goods of a higher order, and even of whole systems is reason enough to replace the idea of the good, judged to be discordant, with the reputedly more irenic ideas of what is valid, just, or obligatory. Küng's global ethic does not go this far. As was said before, it does not set out to *replace* the ethical frameworks of the various religious traditions. Instead of *replacing* ethical frameworks his global ethic is presented as a way of transcending or put even more strongly, solving the problem of competing systems of ultimate legitimation through formal principles that can be accepted as obligatory for all human beings. The global ethic claims to supply the moral foundation for a better individual and global order, leading "women and men away from despair, and society away from chaos."⁸⁴ Thus, a moral consensus is sought that transcends cultural and religious differences.

Ricœur objects to Küng's argument by pointing out that, however necessary, the turn to the norm cannot resolve the tragic moment of moral life. The only outcome of this shift is that the tragic moment of moral life is "displaced by shifting it to the point of articulation between the formal universal and moral judgment in some actual situation."⁸⁵ If it is the reality of conflict and more fundamentally the fact of violence that forced us to pass from an ethic of the good life to a morality of obligation and interdiction, it is "what we can call the tragic aspect of obligation that leads us to complete these formal principles of a universal ethics by rules of application concerning historical-cultural contexts."⁸⁶ This brings us to the downstream of morality.

Confronted with the impasses of real life, a rational morality is unable to construct rules to solve the ethical problems emerging from conflicting visions of the good. Morality may sometimes even make these conflicts worse. The source of these conflicts must be located first of all in the one-sidedness of different moral principles. Secondly, there is no hierarchical ordering among these norms. In addition, these rules also exclude compromises, because of the inflexibility of each person towards an absolute and sacred duty. Lastly, tragic situations occur when the generality of these norms comes at the expense of the concern for the concrete individual. Instead of fixating oneself on the notion of universality in a way that ignores the real conflicts, one should, according to Ricœur, focus rather on the elaboration of concrete norms.⁸⁷ It is an illusion – and not an innocent one – that a universal consensus will end ethical conflicts.

⁸⁴ KÜNG/KUSCHEL, (cf. above, note 32), 12.

⁸⁵ RICŒUR, "The Fundamental and the Historical: Notes on Charles Taylor's Sources of the Self" (cf. above, note 75), 184.

⁸⁶ RICŒUR, "The Universal and the Historical" (cf. above, note 66), 242.

⁸⁷ STEPHAN ORTH, *Das verwundete Cogito und die Offenbarung. Von Paul Ricœur und Jean Nabert zu einem Modell fundamentaler Theologie* (Freiburg-Basel-Vienna: Herder, 1999), 276.

When applied literally, these norms create conflict situations because their universalist claims, interpreted by a certain tradition that does not explain itself, runs into the particularism connected with historical and social contexts in which these same norms are effected.⁸⁸

Basically, tragedy finds its origin in what Ricœur calls the caesura between the universality of the formal rule and the particularity of concrete contexts.⁸⁹ There is no super-rule for transcending this caesura. Ricœur is convinced that only practical wisdom can show us the way through. Indeed, practical wisdom pays heed to universal moral norms but does not give them the last word. Rather, it reflects on how these universal norms can be applied in practice. Ricœur understands practical wisdom as an exercise in translation: the formal rule needs to be translated into concrete situations. Moral norms need to be taken into account in constantly changing contexts. Time and again, moral agents have to search for "the best human possible."⁹⁰

What the latter is can be answered only if the question concerning the good life is asked again. This explains the need for a fundamental reflection on the ultimate frameworks of legitimation. Only such a reflection can "liberate us from never-ending and exuberant discussions and theories that entangle our existential problems in formalistic procedures."⁹¹ For example, how can we respond to the question regarding certain technical interventions for the benefit of reproduction if we do not even know what our longing for children actually means or how that meaning emerges from and is embedded within the great text of history and culture? With regard to the question of, for example, why human genes should not be manipulated, Ricœur says that we can answer these concrete questions only when we turn to the moral sources of our ethical frameworks and ask ourselves fundamental questions regarding the meaning of human dignity. Another example is in connection with organ donation and the meaning of our corporality. Questions to be asked might include: What does it mean to have a body? Are we a body? What is the meaning of a dead body? What does this mean in a relationship between lovers, parents and children? How can we make responsible decisions regarding organ donation when all of these questions are not being asked? Only a fundamental reflection on these and other questions reveals the roots of ethical conflicts. Only then can insight into what is a morally proportionate action in a specific situation develop.

⁸⁸ RICŒUR, "Éthique et morale" (cf. above, note 65), 139.

⁸⁹ RICŒUR, "Response by Paul Ricœur: Philosophy and Liberation," in Eduardo MENDIET (ed.), *The Underside of Modernity. Apel, Ricœur, Rorty, Taylor and the Philosophy of Liberation* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanity Books, 1996), 205–212, 208.

⁹⁰ BURGGRAEVE, "Meaningful Living and Acting: An Ethical and Educational-Pastoral Model in Christian Perspective", in *Louvain Studies* 13 (1988), 137–160, 152.

⁹¹ Jacques DE VISCHER, "Paul Ricœur", in Hans ACHTERHUIS et al. (ed.), *Denkers van nu* (Diemen: Veen Magazines, 2005), 11–24, 21.

IV.4. *Towards an ethic of compromise*

Like Küng, Ricœur recognizes the seriousness of interreligious conflicts. However, he is unconvinced that the project of a global ethic is the appropriate answer. Ricœur does not abandon universality, but over against an interreligious dialogue that focuses on formulating a moral consensus he argues for a dialogue that explores the depth of religious and cultural traditions and their ethical values. Only in a long discussion between cultures and religions can claims surface that truly deserve to be called universal. Such an in-depth dialogue, which does not shy away from discordant convictions, can tell us which universals may become *recognized universals*.⁹² Let us take the example of the mutilation of women. Ricœur is "sure that we are right to say that there is something universal in our assertion that women have a right to pleasure, to physical integrity and so on, even if it is not recognized. But we have to bring that into the discussion. It is only the discussion which may finally convince the other that it's universal, because a claim, as long as it is not recognized by the other, remains a claim."⁹³

A paradoxical notion arises, i.e. that of universals in context, potential universals or inchoative universals in search of ratification, appropriation and recognition. This notion reflects the equilibrium between universality and particularity that Ricœur has in mind.⁹⁴ Concrete universals never take the form of a consensus but always that of a *compromise* in search of ratification, appropriation, and recognition. In this context Ricœur argues for an ethic of compromise. This is not an easy solution: one can not reach a compromise through a unitary justification. Compromise requires the intersection of several frameworks of legitimation. It does not deny existing conflicts and is intrinsically related to the plurality of justifications, to the arguments advanced in a discussion. There is no super-rule for resolving conflicts, hence, the need for an ethic of compromise. Compromise is "honest, if it recognizes power of the claim on both sides, and at the same time, it is creative, because it opens the way to finding new, and wider principles."⁹⁵ Compromise is not to be mistaken for a consensus. "Consensus supposes the equalizing of everything in a magma. Compromise is always weak and revocable, but it is the only way to envision the common good. We reach the common good through compromises between strong but rival claims."⁹⁶ Indeed, "it would appear that the sign of universality can be found only in

⁹² RICŒUR, "Éthique et morale" (cf. above, note 65), 139.

⁹³ RICŒUR, *Oneself* (cf. above, note 20), 125.

⁹⁴ RICŒUR, "Éthique et morale" (cf. above, note 65), 140.

⁹⁵ RICŒUR, "Pour une éthique du compromis. Interview de Paul Ricœur (propos recueillis par J.-M. Muller & F. Vaillant)", in *Alternatives non-violentes* 80 (1991), 2–7, 2.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

the formation of fragile compromises that weave the net of conflicts of the dangerous slope of imminent (religious) war."⁹⁷

This ethic of compromise presents itself as a possible reconciliation between the universal project of humanity and its multiple cultural and religious heritages. After Babel, the common good finds its expression in fragile compromises. For some, this will not be enough because it does not give a clear and certain solution to interreligious and intercultural conflicts. It refrains from stipulating the formal principles that apply to all cases, and it is a dangerous, unending task that is continually longing for recognition. But as Ricoeur states time and again, only those who can live with frailness and uncertainty will find peace after Babel.

V. Conclusion

Looking back at the discussion between Küng and Ricoeur, we can now understand how Ricoeur's 'inner resistance' to Küng's project is rooted in a systematically elaborate moral philosophy. Ricoeur finds Küng's proposal too easy because it actually lacks a reflexive framework.

More concretely, Ricoeur's little ethics is at odds with Küng's global ethic at several points. First, he argues that ethical life originates in the *human* desire to live a good life. The moral law, which seems to be Küng's primary interest, is preceded by the ethical aspiration to live well with and for others within the structure of just institutions. Second, this ethical aspiration is moulded and oriented by *historico-culturally determined traditions*. The human desire for the good comes in many forms. Third, although Ricoeur readily admits that the plurality of ethical frameworks brings about conflicts, he also emphasizes that these structures are *ethical sources*, the importance of which should not be downplayed. Küng's proposal for transcending these conflicting frameworks and focusing on a common morality is not only impossible but will also cut ethical life loose from one of its important life-giving sources. Without its roots, the ethical tree will die. This brings me to a fourth point. Ricoeur agrees with Küng's interest in morality and he would even agree with Küng's conviction that there already is a moral consensus between religious traditions. Again, he would emphasize the interconnection between the human aspiration for the good and the norm. The norm not only limits but also brings human desire to fruition. Although the formal and universal realm of morality transcends the historical and concrete realm of ethics, the intertwining of both is never destroyed. Abstracted from life, the norm is empty. Fifth, Ricoeur explains why a moral consensus in itself is 'useless' in view of ethical conflicts. Morality is unable to construct rules to solve the ethical problems emerging from conflicting

⁹⁷ RICŒUR, "Response by Paul Ricoeur: Philosophy and Liberation" (cf. above, note 89), 208.

visions of the good. The need for proportionate reasoning, and hence for practical wisdom, presents itself before us, the outcome of which can only be inchoate universals. In the end, Ricœur balances between a universal ethics that minimizes the importance of particular religious convictions and a cultural relativism that denies the sieve of universal norms. He argues for a prudential ethic of compromise that requires a dialogue that does not shy away from religious differences but rather faces them with an in-depth inter-religious discussion.

SUMMARY

Cultural and religious differences often lead to conflicts, which sometimes even degenerate into violence. This situation has triggered a debate among universalists and particularists on the (im-)possibility of a global ethic. This article does not repeat the discussion here between universalism and particularism *as such*. Rather, its aim is to shed new light on this discussion by turning to the French philosopher Paul Ricœur, one of the great minds of the twentieth century.

My starting point is Ricœur's discussion with Hans Küng on the 'Declaration Towards a Global Ethic'. This discussion is not very well known and has, to my knowledge, not been commented upon by a third party. In this discussion Ricœur immediately signals his "inner resistance" to Küng's project. First, Ricœur states that the global ethic amounts to a "disembodied formalism" because it is founded on too radical a distinction between universal *formal* norms and particular religious convictions. Moreover, Küng's global ethic also neglects the challenge posed by the application of these formal principles to the ethical complexities with which people are confronted in life. After having explored these objections, I will examine how Ricœur develops an original perspective concerning the contemporary challenge of ethical diversity and the tension between particularity and universality. In this regard, especially his so-called *little ethics* (studies 7–9 in his magnum opus *Oneself as Another*) deserves our attention.

In unpacking and analyzing Ricœur's ethical reflections and elaborating on them in view of the context of diversity, I hope not only to argue how this Ricœurian perspective sheds new light on the discussion concerning the (im-)possibility of a global ethic but also to contribute in a very specific way to Ricœur studies. In this sense, the following article can also be read as an intercultural or interreligious appropriation of Ricœur's ethical reflections.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Kulturelle und religiöse Unterschiede führen oft zu Konflikten, die manchmal sogar in Gewalt ausarten. Diese Verhältnisse haben eine Debatte zwischen Universalisten und Partikularisten über die (Un)möglichkeit einer globalen Ethik ausgelöst. Der vorliegende Artikel wiederholt hier nicht die Diskussion zwischen Universalismus und Partikularismus *als solche*. Vielmehr besteht die Absicht darin, neues Licht auf diese Diskussion zu werfen, indem wir uns dem französischen Philosophen Paul Ricœur, einem der großen Denker des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts, zuwenden.

Mein Startpunkt ist Ricœurs Diskussion mit Hans Küng über die ‚Declaration Towards a Global Ethic‘. Diese Diskussion ist nicht sehr bekannt und wurde, soviel ich weiß, bisher nicht weiter von dritter Seite kommentiert. In dieser Diskussion äußert Ricœur direkt seinen ‚inneren Widerstand‘ gegen Küngs Projekt. Erstens führt diese globale Ethik nach Küng zu einem ‚vom Leib entblößten Formalismus‘, weil sie auf einem zu radikalen Unterschied zwischen universalen *formalen* Normen und partikularen religiösen Überzeugungen gründet. Zudem ignoriert Küngs globale Ethik auch die Herausforderung, die die Anwendung dieser formalen Prinzipien auf die ethischen Komplexitäten, mit denen Menschen im Leben konfrontiert werden, hervorruft. Nach-

dem ich diese Einwände erforscht habe, werde ich untersuchen, wie Ricoeur eine originelle Perspektive hinsichtlich der zeitgenössischen Herausforderung ethischer Diversität und der Spannung zwischen Partikularität und Universalität entwickelt. In dieser Hinsicht verdient vor allem seine sogenannte *petite éthique* (Studien 7–9 in seinem magnum opus *Soi-même comme un autre*) unsere Aufmerksamkeit.

Indem ich Ricoeurs ethische Reflexionen analysiere und sie unter Berücksichtigung des Kontextes der Verschiedenheit fortführe, hoffe ich nicht nur zu deuten, wie diese ricoeurianische Perspektive neues Licht auf die Diskussion hinsichtlich der (Un)möglichkeit einer globalen Ethik wirft, sondern auch auf eine ganz spezifische Weise zu den Ricoeur-Studien beizutragen. In diesem Sinne kann der folgende Artikel auch als eine interkulturelle oder interreligiöse Aneignung der ethischen Reflexionen Ricoeurs gelesen werden.



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.