



The Heartbeat of our Global Responses

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Abstract

The WAAS Interim report 2020 on Global leadership is an impressive document. Those who contributed have done a heroic job in systematically digesting a vast input from various sources. However, it falls short in a key area: the heart is missing. The pragmatic approach of the interim report, with its recommendations, is without any doubt of great importance, but it is not enough. The global challenges confronting us are mostly manmade. Human motivation is of crucial importance. Ignoring the vital contributions in particular of religions therefore seems to me a serious shortcoming. Think of the recent encyclical document Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home. Pope Francis directs an impressive appeal to all people of good will to respect planet earth. Religions could and should play a constructive role in bringing about a more responsible attitude towards man, matter and nature. See also the important contributions of the World Council of Churches (WCC), the World Council of Religious Leaders and Religions for Peace, among others.

1. Spiritual Renewal

Looking at the way major challenges to humanity are handled, one cannot avoid the impression that our intellect is engaged in a process of self-destruction, instead of promoting human well-being. We are living in an insane world, indeed! Could it be that our deepest motivation is fundamentally flawed? We have lost awareness of the direct relation to the basic ground of human existence. Man is not an autonomous human being, but part of the Whole. To capture a spirit of renewal demands nothing less than recapturing a sense of the Transcendent.

“Man is not an autonomous human being, but part of the Whole.”

The essence of this notion is eloquently expressed by Albert Einstein:

“A human being is a part of the Whole, called by us ‘Universe’, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. ***Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.***”

These words are of decisive significance in the actual confrontation with formidable challenges to our human existence. The guiding principle in life is indeed love for humankind and nature. When we grasp the full significance of these words, it will help us to overcome blatant individualism and narrow nationalism.

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2. The Context

Humanity is caught between the devastation now being wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic and the growing existential threat of climate change.

Even more ominous is the serious risk of annihilation of mankind as a result of the unintended or deliberate use of nuclear arms. We seriously underestimate this problem, and the general public remains dangerously ignorant.

These are but the tail ends of a broad spectrum of multi-dimensional global political, economic, social, technological challenges mentioned in the WAAS interim report.

3. Some Additional Suggestions

- **UN Institutional and Cultural Reform:** serious efforts should be made to adapt the UN structure to the current geopolitical realities. More emphasis should be given to the participation of multi-sectoral networks engaging a cross-section of stakeholders from government, business, academia and civil society.
- **Building Trust in Multilateralism:** world religions can—and should—play a significant role in fostering a common global human identity and consciousness. They can help enhance public confidence and support for international organizations and multilateral initiatives.
- **Sustaining Peace, Human Security & Resilience:** needed first of all is a set of guiding principles in human motivation. Mutual respect and trust are here of crucial importance. A major paradigm shift is urgently needed to create a more inclusive, representative, participative, multi-stakeholder system of global security. In this religions too could and should offer inspiring perspectives.

It is imperative that we reach a substantive reduction in global military spending and put a stop to the ongoing (nuclear) arms race. Religions by the nature of their vocation are called to actively pursue the cause of peace and help shift resources to basic humanitarian needs such as emergency relief, food-security, immigration, refugees, including UNHCR, WFP, ILO, etc.

- ***Anti-crisis Transition Economy***: a comprehensive anti-crisis economic strategy must focus on rapid transformation to a more stable, inclusive, equitable and sustainable economy. Rather than embracing unqualified economic growth as the central objective, the world should embrace an economic development strategy, which incorporates the objectives of ecological sustainability, inclusiveness and equity in distribution and access to resources. This requires a paradigm shift in economic thinking, looking for ways to direct and check economic processes so that they serve societal interests. This includes, but goes beyond, notions such as the internalization of externalities to reflect the true cost and benefit of economic activities and changing the metrics for the evaluation of economic progress. It calls for a redefinition of the proper blend of markets and governments, competition, cooperation and regulation; invisible barriers to equitable markets should be eliminated.
- ***Mobilizing Civil Society***: religious organizations and social movements are all key stakeholders and players in global affairs.
- ***Transformative Leadership—Unifying Multi-sectoral Social Movements***: a very important element of effective leadership in the near future is the power to inspire the younger generations. This calls for creative initiatives both from religious institutions and other social and cultural institutions.

“Without the positive inspiration of religion and other sources of humanitarian inspiration, without a basic change in our attitude—hence, our deepest motivation—we cannot hope to truly meet the challenges we face.”

4. Religions: Part of the Problem or a Major Agent for the Better?

We can of course not close our eyes to the ambiguous reality of religion as inspiration for life and love and the abuse of religion by extremists to justify heinous crimes and terror. This reality however cannot detract from religion(s) as being an—essential—part of the solution of conflicts.

Humanity moreover has now reached a stage in which it is of paramount importance for religions to make a far greater effort to overcome above ambiguity, resolve old antagonisms and mobilize the latent forces for peace to be found in each one of them.

World religions share a common responsibility to help develop a moral framework by inspiring humanity towards a more peaceful, just and sustainable world.

In conclusion, without the positive inspiration of religion and other sources of humanitarian inspiration, without a basic change in our attitude—hence, our deepest motivation—we cannot hope to truly meet the challenges we face.

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