

## For the Common Good: Unleashing the Power of Passion & Purpose

### *Living the Dream: Pursuing the Common Good*

Those familiar with my writings and also with the GCGI will easily know that in my view nothing is more urgent and important in our world today than striving for the common good. I have written extensively on this topic. However, as my contribution to our ongoing conversation on the Common Good at our GCGI Oxford 2014 Conference, below I have provided a short summary of and the links to a selection of my writings on the common good.

My perspective comes from two broad sources: (1) from over sixty years of living in globalised, diversified communities, in different countries and continents, in the midst of a diverse group of people, from various cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds; and (2) from thinkers- past and present- who were/are open, fresh and responsive to the human spirit, reflecting deeply on the individual, society, community and the common good. It is fair to say that, their impact on me has been profound. Their wisdom has nourished and nurtured my personal and professional development. For that I am forever grateful.

Given my life journey, I have discovered that, it is in our own best interest as human beings to recognize that our individual and societal wellbeing depends on the wellbeing of everyone else on the planet. We should also rediscover our deepest truth: that we recognize the goodness, love and generosity of the Universe at its current stage of evolutionary development. We should work to foster a spirit of caring and love for others because it is ethically and spiritually right to do so, as well as the only sane policy for saving the planet and saving the human race. Our primary goal must be for being for the global common good, through our Strategy of Generosity, Kindness and Service.

In this regard, we just may be in luck. Many around the world are discovering that, we, the people, are capable of dazzlingly complex thought. Moreover, more and more are realizing that, we are not individuals; we are a species, at our best when we work together for the common good. Our collective intelligence is both extraordinary and infinite. We must unite; have dialogue of ideas, peoples, civilisations, philosophies and initiatives, if we truly wish to change the world for the better.

And now, let us reflect on The Common Good together for a more fruitful and rewarding dialogue:

*"He that seeks the good of the many seeks in consequence his own good."* **St. Thomas Aquinas**

Look All Around You and Pursue the Common Good

"We live in difficult and troubling times, facing unprecedented global challenges in the areas of climate change and ecology, finance and economics, hunger and infectious disease, international relations and cooperation, peace and justice, terrorism and war, armaments and unparalleled violence. It is precisely in times like these – unstable and confusing though they may be – that people everywhere need to keep their eyes on the better side of human nature, the side of love, compassion, trust, gratitude, and empathy, rather than hatred and injustice.

Renewing our faith in the universal character of human values and restoring that which is human to its rightful place at the heart of the globalisation process and of society, whilst directing the decision-making path towards the Common Good must now be at the heart of all we do.

Look all around you, after decades of pursuing the values of neo-liberalism such as individualism, selfishness, egotism, consumerism, and materialism-to name but a few- and the subsequent and consequent outcomes-financial

collapse, ecological degradation, lower morals, higher corruption and nepotism, etc, etc- can you see any alternative but pursuing the Common Good?

## Genealogy of the Common Good: A Bird's Eye Summary

The theological and philosophical origins and sources of the common good are indeed very well documented. As it has been observed, the common good is an old idea with new-found vitality in the global public discourse. Its direct lineage includes philosophers, theologians, and statesmen from various ethical traditions. Debates about the common good allow participation by diverse schools of thought and provide a unique opportunity to build the broad political will necessary to meet today's international moral obligations.

Even where the term itself has not appeared, the underlying values of universal human dignity and a collective approach to our greatest human challenges resonate throughout ethical traditions. The global common good challenges individual traditions to work across boundaries of faith and geography to arrive at a shared moral vision for our highly interconnected world.

Aristotle was the philosophical father of the common good. In his quest to set out the ethical precepts for developing virtuous citizens and building just societies, he developed the idea that both individuals and governments ought to work for the same virtuous goals. By bringing humanity back to its shared common good, he developed an ethical system that attempts to address the shared interests of diverse societies. Aristotle could not conceive of just government as divorced from this pursuit of the common good.

St. Thomas Aquinas played a critical role in wedding Aristotle's concept to the Christian tradition. In addition to building on the biblical idea that one should "not seek that which is profitable to myself, but to many, that they may be saved," Aquinas makes the important point that the common good and the good of individuals are not in opposition. In fact, "He that seeks the good of the many seeks in consequence his own good."

Contemporary Christian sources, both Catholic and Protestant, have built on this long tradition of advocating government for the common good. Vatican II speaks of "the increasingly universal complexion" of the common good, given our growing human interdependence, and argues that we have duties not just to our countrymen but "with respect to the whole human race."

In Protestant traditions the concept of the common good rests on similar foundations of universal human dignity and a shared responsibility to build just political systems. Old Testament injunctions to "Let justice roll down like waters" and in New Testament "Whatsoever you do unto the least of these you do unto me" exemplify religious commands to work for the common good.

The common good resonates beyond Christian traditions as well. The term has rich resonance in the history of Jewish thought and in contemporary Jewish practice. The Jewish tradition of working for justice and the common good within the covenantal community is extensive: Among the 613 commandments laid out in the covenant with Moses are injunctions to protect the disempowered, especially the poor, widows, orphans, and children. By acts of tzedakah (doing justice) the people act in accordance with God's will and fulfil their obligations to the covenant. The related concept of tikkun olam (repairing the world) is also prominent within the contemporary Jewish community.

Like its two Abrahamic cousins, Islam is rich in ethical injunctions grounded in the idea of the common good. The presence of zakat (almsgiving) as one of the five pillars of Islam, and sometimes referred to as one of two cardinal obligations, makes it clear that an ethic of mutual support is at the core of the Islamic faith. There is a strong sense that good government is one that can provide for the poor and needy. The idea of maslaha, translated as either

"public interest" or "common good," guides governmental responsibility to provide for public needs. It has featured heavily in the writings of modern Muslim reformers throughout the Islamic world.

Just as essential to the common good as this charitable ethic is Islam's capacity to show respect for pluralism and its insistence on universal human dignity. Humans share a fitra (noble nature) even outside of the Islamic community, and thus have access to God's truth. Prophets are sent outside the Islamic community "so that humankind might have no argument against God" for excluding one tribe. Our human diversity is the express will of God, and as such, working together for the common good seems a natural outcome: "For every one of you, We have appointed a path and a way. If God had willed, He would have made you but one community; but that [He has not done in order that] He may try you in what has come to you. So compete with one another in good works."

Conceptions of the common good abound in Eastern traditions as well. In all, these rich traditions of religious and philosophical thought have pervaded societies throughout the world, establishing the foundations for civilizations and governments.

In addition to its religious roots, the concept of the global common good is based in civic values that can unite our troubled world and guide our actions in serving for the common good.

Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant expressed similar truths when developing his cosmopolitan ideal of the international community. "Since the narrower or wider community of the peoples of the earth has developed so far that a violation of rights in one place is felt throughout the world, the idea of a cosmopolitan right is not a fantastical, high-flown or exaggerated notion."

However, discovering common ties among varying belief systems is hardly the most arduous part of bridging religious, ethnic, and geographical divides. The greater challenge is to apply the ideas of the global common good to practical problems and forge common solutions. Translating the contentions of philosophers and religious scholars into agreement between policymakers and nations is the task of statesmen and citizens, a challenge to which Globalisation for the Common Good Initiative (GCGI) has adhered itself to, the purpose is not simply talking about the common good, or simply to have a dialogue, but the purpose is to take actions, to make the common good and dialogue to work for all of us, benefiting us all."

**See also:**

## The Common Good

"Commenting on the many economic and social problems that American society now confronts, Newsweek columnist Robert J. Samuelson recently wrote: "We face a choice between a society where people accept modest sacrifices for a common good or a more contentious society where group selfishly protect their own benefits." Newsweek is not the only voice calling for a recognition of and commitment to the "common good." Daniel Callahan, an expert on bioethics, argues that solving the current crisis in our health care system--rapidly rising costs and dwindling access--requires replacing the current "ethic of individual rights" with an "ethic of the common good".

Appeals to the common good have also surfaced in discussions of business' social responsibilities, discussions of environmental pollution, discussions of our lack of investment in education, and discussions of the problems of crime and poverty. Everywhere, it seems, social commentators are claiming that our most fundamental social problems grow out of a widespread pursuit of individual interests.

What exactly is "the common good", and why has it come to have such a critical place in current discussions of problems in our society? The common good is a notion that originated over two thousand years ago in the writings of

Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. More recently, the contemporary ethicist, John Rawls, defined the common good as "certain general conditions that are...equally to everyone's advantage". The Catholic religious tradition, which has a long history of struggling to define and promote the common good, defines it as "the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment." The common good, then, consists primarily of having the social systems, institutions, and environments on which we all depend work in a manner that benefits all people. Examples of particular common goods or parts of the common good include an accessible and affordable public health care system, and effective system of public safety and security, peace among the nations of the world, a just legal and political system, and unpolluted natural environment, and a flourishing economic system. Because such systems, institutions, and environments have such a powerful impact on the well-being of members of a society, it is no surprise that virtually every social problem in one way or another is linked to how well these systems and institutions are functioning.

As these examples suggest, the common good does not just happen. Establishing and maintaining the common good require the cooperative efforts of some, often of many, people. Just as keeping a park free of litter depends on each user picking up after himself, so also maintaining the social conditions from which we all benefit requires the cooperative efforts of citizens. But these efforts pay off, for the common good is a good to which all members of society have access, and from whose enjoyment no one can be easily excluded. All persons, for example, enjoy the benefits of clean air or an unpolluted environment, or any of our society's other common goods. In fact, something counts as a common good only to the extent that it is a good to which all have access.

It might seem that since all citizens benefit from the common good, we would all willingly respond to urgings that we each cooperate to establish and maintain the common good. But numerous observers have identified a number of obstacles that hinder us, as a society, from successfully doing so.

First, according to some philosophers, the very idea of a common good is inconsistent with a pluralistic society like ours. Different people have different ideas about what is worthwhile or what constitutes "the good life for human beings", differences that have increased during the last few decades as the voices of more and more previously silenced groups, such as women and minorities, have been heard. Given these differences, some people urge, it will be impossible for us to agree on what particular kind of social systems, institutions, and environments we will all pitch in to support.

And even if we agreed upon what we all valued, we would certainly disagree about the relative values things have for us. While all may agree, for example, that an affordable health system, a healthy educational system, and a clean environment are all parts of the common good, some will say that more should be invested in health than in education, while others will favor directing resources to the environment over both health and education. Such disagreements are bound to undercut our ability to evoke a sustained and widespread commitment to the common good. In the face of such pluralism, efforts to bring about the common good can only lead to adopting or promoting the views of some, while excluding others, violating the principle of treating people equally. Moreover, such efforts would force everyone to support some specific notion of the common good, violating the freedom of those who do not share in that goal, and inevitably leading to paternalism (imposing one group's preference on others), tyranny, and oppression.

A second problem encountered by proponents of the common good is what is sometimes called the "free-rider problem". The benefits that a common good provides are, as we noted, available to everyone, including those who choose not to do their part to maintain the common good. Individuals can become "free riders" by taking the benefits the common good provides while refusing to do their part to support the common good. An adequate water supply, for example, is a common good from which all people benefit. But to maintain an adequate supply of water during a drought, people must conserve water, which entails sacrifices. Some individuals may be reluctant to do their share, however, since they know that so long as enough other people conserve, they can enjoy the benefits without reducing their own consumption. If enough people become free riders in this way, the common good which depends

on their support will be destroyed. Many observers believe that this is exactly what has happened to many of our common goods, such as the environment or education, where the reluctance of all person to support efforts to maintain the health of these systems has led to their virtual collapse.

The third problem encountered by attempts to promote the common good is that of individualism. our historical traditions place a high value on individual freedom, on personal rights, and on allowing each person to "do her own thing". Our culture views society as comprised of separate independent individuals who are free to pursue their own individual goals and interests without interference from others. In this individualistic culture it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to convince people that they should sacrifice some of their freedom, some of their personal goals, and some of their self-interest, for the sake of the "common good". Our cultural traditions, in fact, reinforce the individual who thinks that she should not have to contribute to the community's common good, but should be left free to pursue her own personal ends.

Finally, appeals to the common good are confronted by the problem of an unequal sharing of burdens. Maintaining a common good often requires that particular individuals or particular groups bear costs that are much greater than those borne by others. Maintaining an unpolluted environment, for example, may require that particular firms that pollute install costly pollution control devices, undercutting profits. Making employment opportunities more equal may require that some groups, such as white males, sacrifice their own employment chances. Making the health system affordable and accessible to all may require that insurers accept lower premiums, that physicians accept lower salaries, or that those with particularly costly diseases or conditions forego the medical treatment on which their live depend. Forcing particular groups or individuals to carry such unequal burdens "for the sake of the common good", is, at least arguably, unjust. Moreover, the prospect of having to carry such heavy and unequal burdens leads such groups and individuals to resist any attempts to secure common goods.

All of these problems pose considerable obstacles to those who call for an ethic of the common good. Still, appeals to the common good ought not to be dismissed. For they urge us to reflect on broad questions concerning the kind of society we want to become and how we are to achieve that society. They also challenge us to view ourselves as members of the same community and, while respecting and valuing the freedom of individuals to pursue their own goals, to recognize and further those goals we share in common."

See further:

## In Pursuit of the Golden Rule

"Those familiar with my writings will easily recall the following passage that I have often written about:

*"The idea of an economics which is value-free is totally false. Nothing in life is morally neutral. In the end, economics cannot be separated from a vision of what it is to be a human being in society. In order to arrive at such understanding, my first recommendation is for us to begin a journey to wisdom, by embodying the core values of the Golden Rule (Ethic of Reciprocity): "Do unto others as you would have them to do to you". This in turn will prompt us on a journey of discovery, giving life to what many consider to be the most consistent moral teaching throughout history. It should be noted that the Golden Rule can be found in many religions, ethical systems, spiritual traditions, indigenous cultures and secular philosophies."*

Now let me explore more and try to share with you more fully the significance and relevance of the Golden Rule our daily lives. Here I am inspired by the writings of Fr. Harry J. Gensler, SJ, who notes the following:

**Treat others as you want to be treated:** Golden-rule essay

The golden rule is endorsed by all the great world religions; Jesus, Hillel, and Confucius used it to summarize their ethical teachings. And for many centuries the idea has been influential among people of very diverse cultures. These facts suggest that the golden rule may be an important moral truth.

Let's consider an example of how the rule is used. President Kennedy in 1963 appealed to the golden rule in an anti-segregation speech at the time of the first black enrolment at the University of Alabama. He asked whites to consider what it would be like to be treated as second-class citizens because of skin color. Whites were to imagine themselves being black -- and being told that they couldn't vote, or go to the best public schools, or eat at most public restaurants, or sit in the front of the bus. Would whites be content to be treated that way? He was sure that they wouldn't -- and yet this is how they treated others. He said the "heart of the question is ... whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated."

The golden rule is best interpreted as saying: "Treat others only as you consent to being treated in the same situation." To apply it, you'd imagine yourself on the receiving end of the action in the exact place of the other person (which includes having the other person's likes and dislikes). If you act in a given way toward another, and yet are unwilling to be treated that way in the same circumstances, then you violate the rule.

To apply the golden rule adequately, we need knowledge and imagination. We need to *know* what effect our actions have on the lives of others. And we need to be able to *imagine* ourselves, vividly and accurately, in the other person's place on the receiving end of the action. With knowledge, imagination, and the golden rule, we can progress far in our moral thinking.

The golden rule is best seen as a consistency principle. It doesn't replace regular moral norms. It isn't an infallible guide on which actions are right or wrong; it doesn't give all the answers. It only prescribes consistency -- that we not have our actions (toward another) be out of harmony with our desires (toward a reversed situation action). It tests our moral coherence. If we violate the golden rule, then we're violating the spirit of fairness and concern that lie at the heart of morality.

The golden rule, with roots in a wide range of world cultures, is well suited to be a standard that different cultures can appeal to in resolving conflicts. As the world becomes more and more a single interacting global community, the need for such a common standard is becoming more urgent."