

PROFESSOR JOHN MBITI COMMENTS TO PRESENTERS ON A CONFERENCE ON GLOBAL ETHICS

John Mbiti 1

I agree about the juxtaposition of local and global (in many aspects of life). However, I also see the existence of multiple “locals” versus “one global.’ Furthermore, these positions are (constantly) changing – or individuals and communities change, and therefore the ethics applied at one time might also be subject to change. Some of your applied ethics at Moi University may not converge with your applied ethics at Indiana University (I presume). The application of ethics at personal or community settings enjoys a certain degree of “flexibility” (without surrendering the basic ethics). While core ethics have the nature of globality, there may be peripheral ethics that make more sense when applied locally, personally, or communally. Can we try to refine this distinction – if one exists? The (mutual) ethics of dealing with my neighbour in Burgdorf, Switzerland do not converge 100% with the ethics of dealing with my neighbour in Kitui, Kenya. In one case it is a foreigner vis-à-vis a foreigner; in the other case it is an indigenous vis-à-vis an indigenous person. Can one talk of globalising what is bound or confined to locality at a given moment in one’s life? Can we say that there seems to be cultural, sociological, and temporal dimensions to applied ethics (whether local or global). How can local culture impact upon global ethics, or global ethics impact upon local culture? And which or whose culture has that to be? Can there ever be a global culture where global ethics can function freely?

Mbiti2

Thank you for calling us “friends” – that sets the stage for openness, confidence and freedom of exchanging our views without hurting anyone if the views differ. I am very glad that we have a female voice in the group, which is an expansion of the group friendship.

We might wish to articulate the values of friendship, since the word itself contains ethical implications. What role does or can friendship play in overcoming enmity, fear, injustice, and war? How can friendship be fostered across ethnic divide, religious diversity, cultural foreignness, and gender prejudices?

Please tell us more what you had in mind when you called us “friends”. Your experiences during the Kenya violence of January 2008, is very revealing about how friendship may sometimes be put to a test and be scathed, but stand firm.

I see friendship as one of the practical and main pillars that can lift up a bundle of global ethics. Friendship speaks a global language that can be learnt by everyone from the youngest children to the oldest members of society, regardless of their economic, social, religious, or political standing. Our Conference might explore proposing this as a core ethical value, on which to build other ethical values for the individual, community, society, and even states (nations), can build peaceful

relations. How do we promote it, sustain it, encourage it, reward it, and celebrate it? Can we conceive of, for example, setting up and celebrating a communal day of friendship, a national day of friendship, and an international day of friendship?

It would be so wonderful, to hear someone say: "I honour you, I respect you, I celebrate you as my (our) friend!" Or "I celebrate our friendship in this or that way!" Or "I thank you for your friendship, I cherish your friendship, your friendship means a lot to me!" Or "your friendship has rescued me from despair or deep depression or meaningless in life. Your friendship has inserted new life into me!" Or "your friendship has overcome my prejudices, my fears, my uncertainties, and my shyness!" There is so much that friendship does and can do, between and among individuals, families, groups, communities and even nations.

Friendship and peace go hand in hand. There are many proverbs about friendship. For example: "**The brother or sister with whom you were born is not your only brother or sister**" (Ethiopian), to mean that friends can become as close as (if not more than) blood sisters and brothers. Another Ethiopian proverb states that: "Even in a multitude of hyenas, one can still find a friend", to show that even among enemies, it is possible to find a supportive friend. Friendship attracts people towards one another into a peaceful fellowship, as still another Ethiopian proverb states: "**If I slaughter an animal for you, I also will eat it.**"

Lack of friends has only one value, which an Ethiopian proverb tells us: "**Being alone is only good for going to the toilet!**"

Nevertheless, there are also some negative aspects of friendship, like nepotism.

Mbiti3

"African communalism" as you call it, has worked well to a point in history. But we need to critically scrutinise it in the light of modern conditions of life, so that it does not remain like a frozen ideal form of life. It should be confronted with the question: Does it have a future? It would be interesting to discuss the contribution, if any, that "Africa communalism" might make to global ethics. Is it not becoming more of myth and less of a practical reality?

Mbiti4

Could you please expound on what you mean when you say that a person ('man') "possesses the capacity to return to his initial universal nature and apply himself globally"? This sounds like saying that a person is able to "save" oneself and regain a kind of paradisaic state of being. If this is what you mean, I find it theologically impossible to swallow let alone to dream about it.

Mbiti5

Your elaboration of the Prophet's reported statement: "I am an Arab without the (letter) 'ain'" is very interesting. You go on to urge "that man should rise above all kinds of particularities... in order to become an international citizen." I am not at ease with the terms "international citizen", and "a global being." On the surface, it is frightening to think of it. How does a person become such a citizen or being? What do you do with identities that people cherish and defend (sometimes blindly and aggressively)? Does global ethics entertain a place (and where) for such citizens and beings - which you imply to be the ideal at which everyone should aim?

Edited by Mutiso for SASOL