

## Preface to Global Civics

Global Civics, a worldwide movement that spans multiple religions, cultures, and nations, is based on a very simple idea. The idea is that we must understand civics – or the study of a citizen’s rights and duties – not within the framework of the nation, but within the framework of the globe. Global civics, then, is a contract between citizens in an age of increasing interdependence between citizens living in separate nations, coming from different cultures, and holding unique religious beliefs.

Developed by the international scholar Hakan Altinay, Global Civics began with a book Altinay wrote entitled [Title of Book]. Since the time of its publication, the book has been translated into several languages. A documentary based on the book was also made by the acclaimed Chinese director Jian Yi, entitled [Name of Documentary]. (The documentary is now available for viewing on YouTube.) Both the book and the documentary are a response to an increasingly interdependent global world, a response that asks us to search for new means of managing our commitments to each other. As such, it highlights the importance of considering a global perspective when we attempt to formulate solutions to political and civic matters.

Academics, social workers, and government officials alike have come to embrace the idea of Global Civics. In particular, some world leaders have offered their input on its relevance to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nobel Peace Laureate Kofi Annan explained how the idea of global civics could be taken up across an array of institutions. He writes, “[The] sense of interdependence, commitment to shared universal values, and solidarity among peoples across the world can be channeled to build enlightened and democratic global governance in the interests of all. I hope that universities and think tanks around the world will deploy their significant reservoirs of knowledge and creativity to develop platforms to enable students to study and debate these issues. This project [Global Civics] is a contribution toward that goal and I look forward to following it closely.” (3)

As Kofi Annan describes the responsibility with which we must engage an increasingly interconnected world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, his words resonate with what many Muslims have been familiar with since the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The idea that we are all responsible for one another because our livelihoods, resources, and histories are shared is one articulated by our beloved Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him): “Everyone is a guardian.” (1) In Islam, it is our duty to realize that every one of us is a guardian of God’s creation in the world. Everyone from the child just entering adulthood, the student, the mother and the husband to the business owner, the worker, and the politician – all are responsible. Realizing such responsibility is the first step to creating a concrete platform for taking action.

Indeed, there are great moments in the history of Islam when the concept was employed in this way. The Muslim scholar Al-Ghazali highlighted the importance of *mahabbah* (love) in his philosophical writings on community. From *mahabbah*, Al-Ghazali

derived the idea of *maslaha* (public good). According to *maslaha* one does not think merely of personal benefit when making a decision, but considers, more importantly, the decision's effect on and potential benefit for the public.

From the ideas developed by Al-Ghazali and others, a thriving civilization emerged more than a millennium ago. In the interim, discoveries were made in the natural sciences. In particular, the fields of medicine, astronomy, and engineering saw scientific revolutions over several centuries. To offer one example, the first scientist to discover that we see with our eyes because light enters the retina rather than leaves it was the 10<sup>th</sup> century Muslim polymath Ibn al-Haitham. An astronomer and mathematician, he also invented the first pinhole camera after noticing the way in which light came through the slits between window shutters. And the list goes on.

In addition to productive advancements in science, the era saw an unparalleled ethic of equality: community members from all three monotheistic faiths were appointed to important political positions. Muslims, Christians, and Jews were represented also in the cultural production of literature, music, and the arts at large. While under researched in current accounts of the era's history, the contribution of women was also remarkable. The standing ruler at the time, Caliph al Mamun, declared that reason and faith have come together in a harmonious coexistence.

As we celebrate this rich history, we must consider what the past teaches us about the future. What of our history can we bring into the present in order to make a better world? In thinking about global civics in relation to this question, we must consider that not all religions, cultures, and nations have an equal ability to influence how we move forward with a global civics, as well as the fact that, in today's world, a small number of countries have greater power than others. Thus, in formulating a true global civics, we must take into account these power differences in order to make sure that the under-represented groups have a voice.

We must not forget that we are in a place of privilege as we introduce, call for, and begin the process of realizing the content of a harmonious existence. We must recognize that there is, on the one hand, the rhetoric of love and forgiveness, and, on the other hand, the way in which such rhetoric is always at a distance from concrete reality. A quick glance at any newspaper today reveals the way in which love and forgiveness have been denied to entire populations, especially in the Middle East and South Asia. In those contexts, the term "democratization" is often used as a cover for economic and political exploitation. The question for us to think critically and ethically about then becomes: how does offering love and forgiveness to a certain individual, group, or nation deny it to others? In light of this question, we can ask another: how can we create a system of checks and balances such that those who are denied love and forgiveness have the chance to demand their rights?

In relation to science, there are further considerations. At the outset, we must acknowledge that, while science can be used towards productive and humanistic ends, it can also be used – and has been used throughout history – towards the exploitation of natural resources, as well as great violence against humanity. We do not have to go far back in history to remember the effect of nuclear weaponry on millions of people during the Second World War, as well as the constant threat of chemical warfare. Recent history shows us, indeed, that as long as nations consider only their interests, then there will always be mutual animosity between nations with advanced weapons. Global Civics seeks to undermine those national boundaries by considering not what is good for any one particular nation, but rather what is good for the citizens of all nations. In doing so, Global Civics seeks to preserve an important aspect of our common humanity.

Because of these considerations, Global Civics will end up functioning differently between developed and developing countries. An American scientist at an engineering firm that creates military aircrafts, for instance, must assume a different form of responsibility from a social worker in Pakistan whose home was demolished by a weapon created by that firm. The scientist must be responsible for rethinking his or her work after learning from the social worker about his or her work's effect on others. In the name of Global Civics, an economically privileged Western citizen has a responsibility towards a disenfranchised non-Western citizen. We must be wary, though, of Western initiatives that impose their particular standards on foreign contexts. The goal of Global Civics, then, is to improve the quality of humanity across power differences while remaining sensitive to what each context asks for in its own terms.

The ethic of the Fetzer Institute, which is committed to the humanistic values of love and forgiveness, offers an interesting model to follow. One facet of the institute's mission is nurturing the responsibility towards others. A theme Fetzer emphasized in its most recent conference is responsibility in the realm of the natural sciences: "As scientists and residents of Earth, we also are acutely aware that ours is a fragile planet... It is our responsibility to extend our love beyond personal needs and maintain these resources with every effort toward their sustainability. We therefore call for a more profound understanding of the scientific basis of love and forgiveness, as essential knowledge, allowing us to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond."

In this book on global civics, we have the chance to come together and think about how scientific research and responsibility intersect. Scientific research, after all, is premised in creating concrete solutions to complex problems. Because of this, science will likely play a pivotal role in helping Global Civics realize itself. Research in Biology and Environmental Studies allows us to understand, for instance, the overarching concerns that humanity faces today, from the effect of carbon monoxide and corporate pollution on the environment to the effect of resource and water scarcity on the livelihoods of children around the world. More than simply identifying problems, scientific research has the capacity to provide the keys to unlocking the door to these complex issues.

At the end of the day, we must remember that, while it is easy to say that humans are interconnected, it is more difficult to agree on exactly how. This is why the idea of a global civics is daunting. We may agree in the abstract, but developing a concrete framework between people who have never met each is a complicated procedure that might be jeopardized if not enough voices are heard. This is why, more than anything, this book asks you to join the conversation. How we manage our increasing interdependence, while continuing to face obstacles that make understanding difficult, is one of the greatest challenges of our time. Pursing it in the Middle East, which has been largely absent from this challenge, is now more important than ever.

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