

For a More Ethical Civilization

By [Prof Rodrigue Tremblay](#)

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“When plunder becomes a way of life for a group of men living together in society, they create for themselves, in the course of time, a legal system that authorizes it and a moral code that glorifies it.” Frederic Bastiat (1801-1850), French economist

“The world today is as furiously religious as it ever was. ... Experiments with secularized religions have generally failed; religious movements with beliefs and practices dripping with reactionary supernaturalism have widely succeeded.” Peter Berger, *Desecularization of the World*, 1999

“I think that on balance the moral influence of religion has been awful. With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil—that takes religion.” Steven Weinberg, 1979 Nobel Laureate in Physics

There has never been more talk about ethics than today, not only in private lives, but also in government circles, in business boardrooms and in the media. That is because most people realize we are living a very corrupt period. [http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2009/cpi_2009_table]

In 2009, the United States ranked 19th in a worldwide corruption index, way below New Zealand (1st) or Denmark (2nd).

Indeed, more than three quarters of Americans believe that we are living at a time of declining moral values. A [recent Gallup poll](#) found that 76 percent of Americans think moral values in their country are getting worse, while only 14 percent believe they're getting better. This would seem to be paradoxical, since other indicators show that the United States is getting more religious and pious. More religion and less morality?

For instance, it has been observed that teen birth rates are the highest in the most religious states. [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/32884806/ns/health-kids_and_parenting/]

That may be because poor people tend to be more religious compared to the rich and tend to be less educated and less well informed. Consider also that it has been observed that religious people are more racist than average. [<http://www.scienceandreligiontoday.com/2010/04/20/why-religion-can-lead-to-racism/>]

Morality is a complex issue, but that is no reason to sweep it under the rug of indifference.

In a [new book](#), I attempt to tackle the issue of ethics and its sources. I have arrived at the conclusion that humanity needs a new worldview—a new moral code— a new objective standard of right and wrong, because our prevailing sources of morality are at best inadequate, and at worse, perverse.

This is because many of our problems today are not only technical in nature, but they also have a moral underpinning, and are thus much more difficult to solve. It may also be because our scientific and technological progress seems to be advancing much faster than our moral progress, with the consequence that problems arise faster than our moral ability to face them and to solve them can cope. Indeed, our problems are more and more global in nature, while our moral worldview is still essentially parochial.

We thought that wars of aggression (or pre-emptive wars) had been abolished with the adoption of the United Nations Charter on June 26, 1945 and the issuance of the Nuremberg Charter on August 8, 1945. But wars of aggression persist. —We also thought that financial crises [see [TheNewAmericanEmpire.com](#)] and the severe economic recessions and sometimes depressions they provoked were a thing of the past, thanks to a protecting net of financial regulations designed to control greed and prevent a repeat of the past. Well, twenty years of wholesale deregulation has brought us back to an era of anything goes and financial collapse. We also thought that the problem of poverty in the world could be alleviated, but abject poverty persists in many parts of the world.

There seems to be a pattern here, and it is that humanity seems unable to break out of a cycle of wars, economic crises and endemic poverty.

And, these throwbacks to an unpalatable past seem to coincide with other developments, such as the spread of nuclear weaponry, the persistence of ignorance, growing social and economic inequalities, disregard for basic democratic principles, the rise in global pollution, and an increasing religion-based willingness to kill and terrorize.

With the current globalization of our problems, we need to extend our circle of empathy and view humanity as a worldwide extended human family. As long as we refrain from facing that challenge, divisiveness and unsolvable conflicts will persist.

The contradiction between modern problems, new scientific knowledge and the inadequacy of our prevalent source of morality or of ethics, led me to ask what kind of values would be required to face the new challenges. What would our civilization look like if we were to adopt them?

In such a such a civilization,

- All human beings would be equal in dignity and in human rights.

- Life on this planet would not be devalued and seen as only a preparation for a better life after death, somewhere beyond the clouds.
- The virtues of tolerance and of human liberty would be proclaimed and applied, subject only to the requirements of public order.
- Human solidarity and sharing would be better accepted as a protection against poverty and deprivation.
- The manipulation and domination of others through lies, propaganda, and exploitation schemes of all kinds would be less prevalent.
- There would be less reliance on superstition and religion to understand the Universe and to solve life's problems and more on reason, logic and science.
- Better care of the Earth's natural environment—land, soil, water, air and space—would be taken in order to bequeath a brighter heritage to future generations.
- We would have ended the primitive practice of resorting to violence or to wars to resolve differences and conflicts.
- There would be more genuine democracy in the organization of public affairs, according to individual freedom and responsibility.
- Governments would see that their first and most important task is to help develop children's intelligence and talents through education.

Yes we can, if we try.

* Drawn from notes for a conference by Dr. Rodrigue Tremblay at the American Humanist Association's Annual Meeting, San Jose, California, Friday, June 4, 2010.

Rodrigue Tremblay [<http://www.thenewamericanempire.com/author.htm>] is professor emeritus of economics at the University of Montreal and can be reached at rodrigue.tremblay@yahoo.com. He is the author of the book "The Code for Global Ethics" at: <http://www.TheCodeForGlobalEthics.com/>

The book "The Code for Global Ethics, Ten Humanist Principles", by Dr. Rodrigue Tremblay, prefaced by Dr. Paul Kurtz, has just been released by Prometheus Books. Please visit the book site at: www.TheCodeForGlobalEthics.com/

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Articles by: **Prof Rodrigue Tremblay**

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