The Interfaith Writings of Hans Küng (1928–2021)

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Abstract

The Catholic theologian Hans Küng spent a lifetime studying philosophy and theology, studies marked by an unusual ability constantly to question and to re-examine his own faith and to enquire into the faith of others. In the first half of his life he had seen world religions ‘only as a horizon with which to view Christianity’, but as time went on, his views became both broader and deeper. This led him to formulate the widely published dictum:

No peace among the nations without peace among the religions.
No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions.
No dialogue between the religions without global ethical criteria.
No survival of our globe without a global ethic.

This brief survey explores some of Küng’s writings about other faiths, including Tracing the Way: Spiritual Dimensions of the World Religions (2002), on Judaism (1992), on Christianity (1994) and Islam (2004).

Keywords: Catholicism, dialogue, global ethic, interfaith, Hans Küng

Hans Küng’s book Tracing the Way: Spiritual Dimensions of the World Religions (2002) began with these words:

The world of the religions seems to be too vast even to survey, let alone comprehend. However, on our globe it is possible to distinguish three great river systems:

— the religions of Indian origin: Hinduism and Buddhism;
— the religions of Chinese origin: Confucianism and Daoism;
— the religions of Near Eastern origin: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The main figure in the first of these religions is the mystic, in the second the wise man, and in the third the prophet.
Küng’s aim was to trace carefully, below the confusion and contradictions of the world of religions, what he calls ‘similarities, convergences and agreements’. Recognising that even in the twenty-first century, religion underpins the thinking of the majority of the world’s population, Küng went out looking not for a unitary shared religion, since diversity enriches, but for a shared ethic in order to build peace. For he was fully persuaded that there can be:

- No peace among the nations without peace among the religions.
- No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions.
- No dialogue between the religions without global ethical criteria.
- No survival of our globe without a global ethic.

At times, this often-reprinted ‘creed’ has been published with different endings. For example, at the front of his book Islam the last line is:

- No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundations of the religions.

These ideas, at the same time both simple and profound, arose for Küng out of a lifetime studying philosophy and theology, studies marked by an unusual ability constantly to question and to re-examine his own faith and to enquire into the faith of others. In the first half of his life he had seen world religions ‘only as a horizon with which to view Christianity’, but as time went on, his views became both broader and deeper. The pithy statements evolved into his ‘Global Responsibility’ series, which in turn was summarised in Tracing the Way. The book was translated into English by John Bowden, of blessed memory, who was one of many interfaith British theologians inspired by Küng. This book is an easy read, based on the script of a television series. It not only provides a fine introduction to the world’s faiths, but suggests paths towards a shared future, ‘tracing the way’.

Küng began his interfaith involvement at the highest possible level, as an adviser to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), at the time when it was seeking to build bridges with other faiths, and therefore to create a theology which recognised them. At this time, he worked closely with Father Joseph Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI. But Küng’s official involvement with the formation of Catholic doctrine did not last long. He soon became far more critical of his own Catholic Church than he was of other faiths. He opposed papal infallibility, the celibacy of priests, and he advocated contraception and assisted dying. Asked by Der Spiegel if he believed in hell, he quoted John-Paul Sartre, ‘Hell is other people’, and continued, ‘People create their own hell’. And he went on:
'But my most drastic experience was the revocation of my license to teach as a Roman Catholic theologian in 1979. It was devastating to me, both emotionally and physically. I wondered whether I should have given in. All they wanted was that I keep quiet. They said the people in Rome didn’t care about my personal beliefs. You can believe what you wish, they told me. Some people say that if I had backed down at the time, I would have been made a cardinal long ago. But that was precisely not my goal'.

Küng backed up his interfaith writings with major studies on *Judaism* (1992), on *Christianity* (1994) and *Islam* (2004). Jewish scholars have rarely accepted uncritically explanations of our faith by Christian scholars, and Küng’s *Judaism* is no exception. In a highly critical review, Susannah Heschel slated the book for a complete inability to understand *halakha*, and therefore Orthodox Jewish belief and practice in our time. Heschel also read the book as a call to Jews to stop mourning the Holocaust and to forgive and be reconciled. She saw the book not so much as a call to dialogue but rather a demand that Jews accept Küng’s own attitudes and theological conclusions. In a much more sympathetic review, Jonathan Magonet found himself willing to listen to the hard questions Küng asks, pointing out that Küng is just as critical of his own faith. ‘What is worrying to this reviewer is not the challenges offered by Professor Küng but uncomfortable questions about who within our own Anglo-Jewish community could even begin to respond to the dialogue he is offering.’

*Islam*, like everything Küng wrote, has a clear and logical argument, beginning with an investigation into ‘The Hostile Image of Islam’ and ending with ‘Islam, An Image of Hope’. He quotes the full English translation of the first surah in the Qur’an, (*al-fatihah* = ‘the opening’), and asks, ‘But cannot this fatihah, the foundation, sum and quintessence of Islam, also be prayed by a Jew or a Christian? I have done so, with conviction, in a Muslim context, and such prayer is reported from trialogue meetings all over the world’. The book contains a plea for ‘more Islamic scholars’ to ‘allow themselves to be convinced of the value of . . . solid and cautious historical-critical research’. It is not surprising that this plea has not found favour across the Islamic world – and yet, since Küng’s book was published, a lot of progress has been made towards Jewish and Christian understanding of how very many Islamic scholars have indeed used the tools of historical criticism, and are determined to continue to do so.

Küng was also a powerful interfaith activist. His great achievement was to compose, after much consultation, the ‘Declaration Toward a Global Ethic’, which was approved by the Parliament of the World’s Religions in 1993 in Chicago, being the one hundredth anniversary of the first such Parliament in 1893, also in Chicago. The ‘Declaration’ contains
four commitments, to non-violence, to a just economic order, to a culture of tolerance, and a culture of equal rights between men and women. A brief ‘Introduction’ composed by a committee of the Parliament added the all-important imperative to halt the destruction of our planet and abuses of the earth’s ecosystems. In 1995, Küng founded the Global Ethic Foundation, which he worked for tirelessly in his later years. The work of the Global Ethic Institute at the University of Tübingen in Germany, the university where Küng spent his whole career, will continue and will be a lasting legacy.

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