

Global Ethic Project

Hans Kung (1) / Reviewed by Hassan Hamed

This book is both important and unique for two reasons: the long and rich experience of its author, Hans Kung, and the comprehensiveness of the project which he outlines, acknowledging the role of world religions in human rights issues. Hans Kung is a Swiss Catholic, who studied philosophy and theology. He stood out in circles close to the Vatican, and was thereafter named the Professor of Fundamental Theology at the University of Tübingen in the Federal Republic of Germany, then was appointed advisor for the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). He was allowed to supervise the education of Catholic priests, but soon quarrelled with the Church over certain doctrines of the faith in the late sixties, because of his views on papal infallibility, the meaning of salvation and the possibility of

redemption of non-catholic, non-Christian believers. This debate went on for more than ten years between both parties, but Kung was eventually stripped of his canonical license to operate as a Catholic theologian in 1979. He continued to teach at the aforementioned university and furthered his experience in the eighties, by establishing dialogues with Muslims and Jews, then with Buddhists and Hindus. All of these dialogues were published in now-bestselling books. Kung formed a foundation and remained firm in his belief in an Interreligious dialogue and the possible participation of believers in world peace. His books were translated into several languages including Arabic.

Kung's book focuses on three major themes:

- there is no continuance without global ethics
- no world peace in the absence of religious peace

- no religious peace without an Interreligious dialogue

After the introduction, the author examined these headlines in two of his book's three sections.

In the first part "from modernity to post modernity," Kung mentions that 1918, the year the first World War ended, was a turning point: The League of Nations soon emerged, drawing lessons from the horrible war, but hope dissipated early since it failed. Colonialism spread and Europe had its first encounter with Fascism and Marxism, which dealt a great blow for the fragile stability and brought on the second World War. After this, the United Nations saw the light, along with the cold war opposing communists to liberalists and the sudden emergence of Japan in Asia. The long and hard conflict finally led to the destruction of Marxism (the socialist state) and it seemed that liberal democracy had swept a great victory. We are not oblivious to

the faults and disadvantages of capitalism on the ethical front, however, neither are we blind to the fact that this sudden transformation (globalization and post-modernity) does not imply a break with ethics. It is rather a transformation that eliminates all confusion surrounding the possibility to form a new world order, which the author sees as necessarily relying on global and comprehensive ethical values. The current international crisis should not make us attack modernity, as all religious fundamentalists do, just as it should not motivate us to transcend modernity. We must contain the modern era in an ethical system whose values and purposes are both objective and inclusive.

What necessity calls for ethics?

Friedrich Nietzsche demanded that we go beyond good and evil and reach an elevated vacuum point of humans' humanity that transcends them both. But the absence of these principles leaves no place for this humanity.

This individualism that was later continued through existentialism has not been a motivation or a platform of meeting in the world, even in the citizen-centred democracies. The formation of a democracy requires a basic agreement or a minimum of rules, values and communal positions that are founded on the freedom of choice.

This is also the case for global value systems that live off oppression, which leads us to the necessity of finding global ethics that rise on a basis of agreement and conviction.

Professor Kung believes that these convictions and agreements exist between followers of one religion, as well as between non-believers. To reach a platform of global ethics, pious persons must recognize the freedom of impious persons and vice versa. He is convinced that humans cannot reach a global ethical pattern without religion. They have tried to formulate one in the United Nations charter and the International Declaration of Human Rights. Peace was however not achieved because of the hostile

position towards religion and the marginalization of the values and contributions of the pious.

We should therefore start speaking of mutual responsibilities, in a context of mutual respect through an alliance that was once possible and is now imperative.

Is an ethical system viable without religion?

In the first half of the twentieth century, religions seemed to be heading to a doomed end, and that the idea of "natural right" was to triumph and reign. However, religion is once more a challenge these days, with the increase of numbers of religious people, the destruction of absolutist regimes, the destabilization of democracy and the ethical inclination of religions. Just as atheists could not establish absolute ethical standards, the religious cannot compel others to believe that everything is fixed and inspired and divinely planned.

There appeared the need thus to reach the golden rule of ethical moderation. Christianity and Islam have contributed to it to a great extent, despite all the historical digressions that took place in the name of religion. Religion offers a space where freedom is linked to justice, equality to pluralism, fraternity to warmness between all humans, men and women alike, and tolerance to shared responsibility.

The second part of the book dealt with the following subject: no world peace in the absence of religious peace. This implies that the theological system of every religion supposes an ethical pattern of its own. But religious experiences with ethics have led, like laic ethics, to the outbreak of wars like the one Lebanon went through when it seemed that religion created conflict, because of the fanatic attachment each person or follower of a certain

religion had for his own religious and ethical system.

To be fair, however, we must mention that just as there were religious wars between Catholics and Protestants in Germany, France and Poland, there also were positive religious experiences as well, such as the peaceful religious coexistence in these same places. History teaches us that world peace can never exist without religious peace. We must deal with this subject on different levels, according to Kung: The issue of truth, the issue of globalism and inclusiveness and the existence of a religious platform for human values.

The first level: The followers of any given religion persist in the thought that they have exclusive rights to truth, salvation and redemption. Self criticism through historical experience makes us conclude, however, that there are common points of truth, shared by all religions, especially the monotheistic ones, which means that truth is either one or shared. What varies though, are the perspectives under which it is seen despite its essential unity.

Global views and objective criticism leads followers of all religions to common visions. Should we examine the aforementioned pairs, i.e. justice, freedom, tolerance, coexistence, peace, warmth etc. we will reach a religious basis of human values that competes with and transcends the non-believers' natural right rule. Kung illustrates his point through citing human dignity as a basic rule in the ethic of all religions. He says that the relationship linking religion to humanity is a dialectic one. As for the third virtue or value, it is the stability ensued from the dialogue between the followers of a given religion or religions as well as the one between the believers and the non-believers. The author also cites the example of the UNESCO conference, held in Paris in 1990. This meeting discussed for the first time religion's role in human rights education, through the benefits from the experiences of believers.

The remaining chapters of the third part in the book reveal Kung's new reading of main philosophical and historical writings that

sought to establish a dialogue with religion. He mentioned Hegel, Shpinger, and Toynbee. Hegel speaks of an ascending unilateral horizontal spiritual evolution, while Shpinger perceives the West's downward fall towards dissolution, unlike the former's theory, and Toynbee believes in the gradual spiritual evolution. On the light of this discussion, Kung, who shows a slight penchant towards Hegel, studies the reality of major religions in today's world and classifies it in three categories: prophetic religions, Sufi religions and religions of wisdom. He concludes that there is no world peace without an Interreligious dialogue. If it is the responsibility of laics to acknowledge the role religion plays in peace, then it is also the responsibility of religious followers to establish a religious dialogue in order to reach a religious peace then contribute gradually to world peace.

At the end of the book, Kung gives directions for an Interreligious dialogue in the postmodern world. It is up to politicians,

businessmen, scholars and men of religion to establish a dialogue between themselves: a dialogue on life, an official dialogue and an international and academic dialogue to reach global ethics.

[1] - A Global Ethic Project, Religions and World Peace, translated from German into Arabic by Joseph Maaloul and Ursula Assaf and reviewed by a Lebanese author, Paul Library, Lebanon, 1998.