

Hans Küng

The Long Road to a Global Ethic

Anyone who reads my 1990 book *Global Responsibility* with an open mind may well be struck, without even really thinking about it, by how many preliminary studies and prior decisions have found their way into this relatively short volume. A discussion with a group of theologians was an occasion for me to reflect on my own long road to the Global Ethic Project, to analyze the different stages and to disentangle the various strands of thought in it.

First stage: Steadfastness in one's own faith and unlimited capacity for dialogue (the existential presuppositions)

Even when I was at school in Lucerne (I left in 1948), I had questions about the Catholic 'extra'-dogma: *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* - outside the church there is no salvation. I then brought these questions with me into my philosophical (1948-1951) and theological (1951-1955) studies in Rome. So at the papal Gregorian University there I took part with keen interest in a seminar on the salvation of non-Christians (*De salute infidelium*). It offered much that interested me, but I was not convinced by its solutions.

It was at this time that under the influence of my spiritual director in the Collegium Germanicum, Father Wilhelm Klein, and in the company of like-minded fellow-students (a theological study group which was soon to be banned), I began to become independent in my theological thinking and started to work. My very first theological manuscript, of sixteen single-spaced typewritten pages, with the title '*On Faith. An Attempt*' (1953) comes from this period. It begins with these words:

Since the beginnings of Christianity the salvation of unbelievers has been a cross for theology: God's will for universal salvation and the absolute necessity of faith are both indisputable truths of revelation. And yet their combination in a mystery of the Gentiles seems more of a contradiction than a mystery... Today - after many heresies in church history - there is relative clarity about God's will for universal salvation. But what about the necessity of faith? What kind of faith is necessary? And what is faith anyway?... In this brief attempt - it cannot be more - I shall simply investigate this mystery of faith to some degree, in the hope that from here some light may also fall on the salvation of unbelievers, which is so obscure for us.

The intensive study of *Karl Barth's* multi-volume *Church Dogmatics* for my theological licentiate in Rome and doctorate in Paris, which followed, provided only a highly speculative solution to the main problem (the salvation of unbelievers?) on the basis of the doctrine of predestination. But Barth's theology showed me:

1. that theology can be a most exciting challenge to thought and faith;
2. that a concentration on christology is of crucial importance for both Protestant and Catholic theology;
3. that in particular the doctrine of the justification of the sinner by the grace of God alone on the basis of faith (independently of pious works or worldly successes and failures) also had to be fundamental to my own personal existence;
4. that an agreement in principle between Roman theology (the Council of Trent) and Reformation theology (represented by Karl Barth) on this basic question, which split Christianity in the sixteenth century, is quite possible today.

The publication of this dissertation under the title *Justification. The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection* (1957), with a foreword by Barth, was generally regarded by Catholics and Protestants at the time as a sensational theological breakthrough on this question. Indeed, its results were confirmed in the 1971 Malta Declaration by a study commission of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Secretariat for Unity, which later became famous. However, they were later 'pigeonholed' by the Holy Office (the 'Congregation for Faith'). There was a deafening silence about this book in the most recent official conversations on the doctrine of justification which were brought to a doubtful conclusion and finally once again torpedoed by the 'Congregation for Faith'. This was not only because of the cowardice of the Catholic representatives in the discussion and the conformism of their Protestant counterparts, but also because of the method adopted in these

more recent conversations: instead of offering in advance an interpretation which also made clear the relevance of the doctrine of justification for the average Christian today ('freedom in a competitive society') on the basis of the results already achieved forty years ago (cf. my introduction to the German paperback edition of *Justification* in 1986), the participants fell in with the Roman method of investigating the two doctrinal declarations sentence by sentence like paragraphs of a doctrinal statement and interpreting them as harmoniously as possible.

I saw no reason to get involved in this superfluous undertaking. But I readily confess that my very first theological work gave me my own roots in a living faith in Christ which has lasted me for my whole career, and with it an openness to other forms of faith. I had experienced that *steadfastness in one's own faith and a capacity for dialogue with those of another faith are complementary virtues*. From the start Karl Barth had immunized me against the seductive calls of the 'pluralists' who later called on me to cross the 'Rubicon' and recognize that all religions and their founders are in principle equal. However, it had become clear to me that if there is to be progress in ecumenical understanding it is necessary to draw out the consequences of the doctrine of justification for an understanding of the churches and ministry (cf. the memorandum of the working party of ecumenical university institutions 'The Reform and Recognition of Church Ministries' of 1973, which I prompted and introduced). But in the second half of the twentieth century this particular understanding of the church called for another quite different openness, one which went far beyond the Reformation positions of the sixteenth century and the Christian churches.

Second stage: Radical universalism (the ecclesiological presuppositions)

In my first years at Tübingen I worked through what I had already thought out for myself during my years in Rome. Without ignoring conservative positions (I had a seminar with Professor Peter Beyerhaus in 1963), I subjected the dogma '*outside the church no salvation*' to a specially thorough critique. So I was prepared even during the Second Vatican Council in 1964 to get beyond the questionable ecclesiocentricity of Christian theology in a programmatic lecture on 'Christianity as a Minority. The Church among the World Religions' at a great congress of Christian theologians in Bombay. I demonstrated God's all-embracing grace on the basis of Old Testament witnesses, and the preaching of Jesus and the apostles (Paul, Acts,

the Johannine prologue). In this way it was possible to relate the truth of the gospel dialectically to the truth of the world religions and from the Christian side to give grounds for a radical *universalism*. Indeed, reversing the customary terminology, I called the world religions the 'ordinary' way of salvation for non-Christians as opposed to the 'extraordinary' highway of salvation in the church. The consequence for Christians is an understanding, a commitment and an obligation on the part of the church, as the minority, towards the world religions as the majority.

In my book *The Church*, the essentials of which I had already worked out during Vatican II (1962-1965), I developed further the position that I adopted here. Now, however, I could even use a Council text as a basis: the Vatican II Constitution on the Church (Chapter 16), which speaks of the *possibility of salvation* for those of other religions, indeed *even for those who are not religious*, but nevertheless 'strive to lead a good life':

Nor is God remote from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, since he gives to all men life and breath and all things (cf. Acts 17.25-28) and since the saviour wills all men to be saved (cf. I Tim.2.4). Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience - those too may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life (Lumen gentium no.16).

However, in the following year, in view of the heightened reaction of the Curia against the Council, the '*extra*'-dogma 'No salvation outside the church' which was outdated but nowhere explicitly corrected, because it was alleged to be *infallible*, became for me the *prime example* of the way in which official Roman Catholicism spoke with *two tongues*. Indeed it became a test case for truthfulness. Moreover I called my polemical work of this time *Truthfulness. The Future of the Church* (1968). In the chapter on 'Manipulation of the Truth?' (B VIII) I made it clear that neither a positivistic-literal nor a dialectical-speculative interpretation of dogmas could resolve the problems; only a *historical* and in this sense truthful *interpretation of dogmas* could do justice to them. But since this call for truthfulness was not heard, at least in Rome, and in the meantime the encyclical *Humanae vitae* (1968), against contraception, had been presented with a claim to quasi-infallibility, signalling a clear departure from the Council, it was time for the relentless analysis made

in *Infallible? An Inquiry* (1970). This was a book which brought me much criticism and suffering in my church, but respect and credibility outside, far into the world religions. At any rate it was a great help for dialogue with the religions.

Third stage: The Jesus of history (the christological presuppositions)

After the critical destruction of a fundamentalist understanding of dogma my concern was to present the 'essence' of *Christianity* on a solid scholarly New Testament basis. I did that in *On Being a Christian* (1974), a book which attempted to pose a *twofold challenge*:

1. the challenge from the *modern humanisms* (Chapter A 1): even after the revolution of 1989 I did not have to make any substantial corrections to the critique of the two great modern ideologies of technological evolution and political-social revolution (not even in the differentiated account of 'political theology' and liberation theology in D III,1);
2. the challenge from the *world religions* (A III): here, in a necessarily very succinct form, I at least hinted at the wealth of the non-Christian religions. At the same time, however, I repeated the critique of the 'extra'-dogma, and criticized both the widespread ignoring of the other religions by the Protestant theology of the time and the pseudo-solution to the 'extra'-dilemma by Karl Rahner which was reiterated by many people then. Rahner thought that he could commandeer as 'anonymous Christians' the members of other religions and even atheists with honest convictions - contrary to their understanding of themselves.

However, after this description of the present-day horizon of being a Christian the bulk of the book was devoted to *working out what is specifically Christian*, also as distinct from what is Jewish (B; 'The Distinction'), and then above all to the concrete Christian programme (C) as it is depicted bodily in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of Christians. It was and is of decisive importance for a dialogue not only with Judaism but also with Islam and all the other world religions for there to be a comparison not only of speculative constructions by both sides (for example the doctrine of the Trinity and usually analogies with very different structures in other religions), but also of the *historical Jesus of Nazareth* with the historical Buddha Gautama, Confucius and Muhammad.

For this reason alone (and also with contemporaries in mind), the customary high dogmatic 'christology from above' (beginning in God's eternity), which is barely understandable to men and women of today, needed to be replaced by a 'christology from below' that had been tested historically. Such a christology attempts to depict the Jesus of history by outlining his proclamation, his conduct and his fate. Without the critical synthesis of the study of Jesus by New Testament scholars which here runs to well over two hundred pages it would have been impossible for me a decade later to carry on public dialogues with scholarly representatives of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese religion and Judaism.

Fourth stage: The infinite in the finite (the theological presuppositions)

As a 'prolegomena to a future christology', as early as 1957 in Paris I had begun a major work on *Hegel's christology* under the title *The Incarnation of God*. However, it was not finished until 1970 and was published almost simultaneously with *Infallible?*. In it, in an intensive discussion above all with Hegel I developed an *understanding of God* which starts from a biblical basis and at the same time takes seriously the new cosmic and evolutionary picture of the world characteristic of European modernity. In this way there could be new reflection on the *worldliness and historicity of God*. Indeed, it was possible to give adequate expression to *the presence of the infinite in the finite, the eternal in the temporal*. And I became convinced that only in the light of such a deep understanding of God was it possible to carry on a thorough discussion with the great Eastern conceptions of Brahman, Dharma and Dao. For me *The Incarnation of God* provided the basis for a thoroughgoing 'Answer for Today' to the question of God, which was published in 1978 under the title *Does God Exist?* This book begins with the basic problems of philosophy in modernity, with Descartes ('Cogito ergo sum') and Pascal ('Credo ergo sum'), a topic familiar to me from my years in Rome and Paris. In the summer semester of 1960 I had also begun my very first series of Tübingen lectures in fundamental theology with it.

In retrospect, this intensive historical and systematic thinking seems to me to be significant for the *Global Ethic Project* in three respects:

- It was necessary to engage in a thorough critical discussion of the normative *atheistic positions* of modernity: with Feuerbach's anthropological atheism, Marx's social and political atheism, Nietzsche's nihilistic atheism and Freud's

psycho-analytical atheism (Chapters C and D). That many of the concerns of these great thinkers were justified had to be brought out just as much as the fact that in the end of the day their arguments against the existence of God were unfounded. Only in this way could a *scholarly basis for a possible coalition of believers and non-believers* in matters of ethics be provided, despite all the differences over belief in God.

- It was also necessary to work out an alternative to nihilism on a quite basic level: *reasonable fundamental trust* (Chapter E) as a free Yes to a highly ambivalent reality, albeit a Yes which time and again had to be affirmed anew. This basic trust seems to me to be the *indispensable presupposition for an authentic human, humane and moral life* which is also possible for atheists (my examples were Bertrand Russell, Ernst Bloch and Albert Camus): an autonomous ethic in the sense legislating for oneself and taking responsibility for fulfilling oneself and shaping the world. Fundamental trust is the basis for a basic ethic.
- It is also necessary, at least for theologians, to work out the *controversy between 'dialectical' theology* (Karl Barth), which dismisses the world religions as unbelief, and *'natural theology'* (Vatican I), which speaks all too simplistically of a 'natural' infrastructure for the 'supernatural' superstructure of the Christian religion. To work out this basic problem is a presupposition for a *constructive critical discussion with the world religions*. In this case it is especially Protestant theology, which usually seems more progressive than Catholic theology, that at least in Germany - with welcome exceptions above all in religious education and missionary studies - has largely missed joining in the discussion. This is because it has either stuck to Barthian 'dogmas' or fallen back on the liberal positions of the nineteenth century. It is not surprising that such systematic theology holds back on the world religions because of a lack of knowledge and because of its christological narrowness is also inhibited about a global ethic project.

Fifth stage: Three great religious river systems with paradigm shifts (presuppositions in the study of religion)

Already in *Does God Exist?* there are two chapters which deal with the study of religion. One is about the *God with many names in Chinese religion* and the other

is about the *nameless' God' in Buddhism*. These culminate in the challenge posed to each other by the Christian and the Asian understandings of God. In connection with this, in my book *Eternal Life?* (1982), Christian eschatology is connected with ideas from the world religions (above all about the transmigration of souls).

Anyone who enters into dialogue with members of other religions rapidly notes that one cannot make progress without serious knowledge - without knowledge of the religion of others and one's own. The liberation from the cycle of lectures on dogmatics which came about as a result of my clash with Rome in 1979/80 gave me a unique opportunity to concentrate on some concerns which I had already been pursuing for a long time. Without them the Global Ethic Project would never have become reality.

First of all *hermeneutical reflections* were needed. Finally I had time to *apply to the history of religion the theory of paradigm change* which Thomas S. Kuhn had developed and which I had studied intensively around the middle of the 1970s: first to Christian theology and the church, but soon also to other religions. Although their adherents very often were unaware of the fact, over the course of the centuries all these religions had gone through different epoch-making overall constellations of their beliefs, values and modes of procedure, so many different paradigms. After lectures in the Studium Generale of the University of Tübingen in 1980/81 and at the University of Chicago in 1981, our Institute for Ecumenical Research had held an international ecumenical symposium 'A New Paradigm for Theology' (two volumes of documentation were published, edited by me and David Tracy, in 1984/86). Key representatives of Catholic and Protestant theology took part in the symposium.

On the basis of all this preliminary work, in *Theology for the Third Millennium* (1987) I attempted 'an ecumenical view' which reflected on the problems produced by the application of the paradigm theory to the history of religion and from there sketched out the new paradigm of theology. This goes beyond the classic controversial questions which divide Christian churches and instead concerns itself more with the world religions and their paradigm changes. In this connection I was particularly preoccupied with the *question of an 'ecumenical criteriology'* which can develop criteria for 'true religion'.

Happily, in the 1980s several important representatives of religious studies took the risk of carrying on public dialogues on the great world religions in the Studium Generale which were attended by an audience of many hundreds: on *Islam* (Josef van Ess), *Hinduism* (Heinrich von Stietencron), *Buddhism* (Heinz Bechert),

Chinese Religions (Julia Ching) and *Judaism* (Pinchas Lapide). I learned an enormous amount from these dialogues, which required a great deal of work, and were accompanied by many personal conversations. In them I saw my own insight confirmed: there can be no serious foundation for inter-religious dialogue without *precise knowledge* of other religions and one's own. In these public lectures I was able to test, correct and supplement much that I had previously learned in countless books and on journeys in almost all the regions of the world - I visited North Africa for the first time as early as 1955. All these efforts are documented in the composite volumes *Christianity and the World Religions. Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism* (1984) and *Christianity and Chinese Religion* (1988).

The dialogue lectures on figures from world literature which Walter Jens and I gave in the late 1980s to an even larger audience in the Studium Generale also provided powerful stimuli for the global ethic project: not only the tremendous longing for peace in Gryphius, Lessing, Hölderlin and Novalis, but also the problems of the modern paradigm which are manifested from Pascal through Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky to Kafka (*Dichtung und Religion*, 1988). A later set of dialogue lectures, *Anwälte der Humanität*, which deal with Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse and, for the concrete depiction of the Humanum, also Heinrich Böll, showed me new forms of coming to grips with the other religions.

In time, the *political relevance of the dialogue between the religions* also dawned on me. As early as 1967, in connection with a lecture on the centenary of the American University in Beirut, it had become clear to me that a cruel war between Christians and Muslims (which at that time was by no means an immediate threat) could have been avoided had the Christians voluntarily renounced some of their privileges (which they had seized through the French colonial regime) and sought a more peaceful arrangement with the Muslims. Fifteen years later I then gave the epilogue to *Christianity and the World Religions* the wholly programmatic title '*No World Peace without Peace between the Religions*' (1984).

Finally, right at the beginning of the volume *Christianity and Chinese Religion* which I edited with Julia Ching I clearly stated my fundamental recognition that the religions deriving from China form a third religious river system alongside the religions of a Semitic, Near Eastern origin and those of an Indian mystical origin. This system was to have its effects as far as Korea, Japan and, of course Taiwan. That recognition provided the basis for my theory of the *three great river systems of the high religions* - the framework for the paradigm analysis of the individual religions. I first became more deeply concerned with the ethnic religions, tribal religions ('na-

ture religions'), in preparing for a journey lasting many weeks in Africa south of the Sahara in 1986 and on a TV filming trip to Australia in 1998, and later in working out the consequences of my experiences.

Sixth stage: Global standards for common living (ethical presuppositions)

In the Epilogue to my 1988 book on Chinese religion, 'dual citizenship in faith' is discussed as a 'challenge to the West' in terms of culture, ethics and faith. Here already I remarked:

One of the pressing concerns of our time is to bring to light the fact that *all the great religions of humanity share fundamental ethical principles*. This must be done for the sake of religious and political peace in the world. An ethical bond in particular could become unifying, peacemaking bond in the community of peoples. It could contribute to a freer, more just, and more peaceful coexistence in our increasingly uninhabitable world.

After that, on the one hand the *World Economic Forum* in Davos and its founder and president Klaus Schwab, quite personally, and on the other hand *UNESCO* in Paris, both of which invited me to lectures, became the *immediate preparation* for my book *Global Responsibility* (1990). In February 1989 I presented the basic paper for a symposium at UNESCO on the topic 'No World Peace without Peace Between the Religions', and in the middle of the revolution in Eastern Europe in February 1990 I spoke in Davos on the question '*Why do we need global ethical standards to survive?*' The third part of *Global Responsibility* had been prepared for by my work on some important *preliminary reflections on the philosophy of history* (in a critical discussion of Hegel, Spengler and Toynbee) for the great project on Judaism, Christianity and Islam sponsored by the Robert Bosch Jubilee foundation.

I decided on the original German title for my book *Global Responsibility*, 'A Global Ethic Project', only relatively shortly before publication. In analogy to global politics, the global economy, the global finance system and so on, I coined the term *global ethic* to describe a common ethic for representatives of the various religious and non-religious world-views. I did so without knowing that the Tübingen moral theologian Alfons Auer had already used the same term in an article. Once my attention had been drawn to that, however, it immediately became clear that Auer had used this term in a completely different way: not like me in an inter-religious sense but within Christianity as a counterpart to 'salvation ethic'. I later felt that this term

was endorsed in a contribution by the famous Swiss international lawyer Max Huber, who for many years was President of the Permanent International Court of Justice at the Hague and President of the International Committee of the Red Cross. In a 1955/56 article, which I saw some years after my *Global Responsibility*, Huber was already using the term 'global ethic'. However, he thought that the diversity, difference and contradictory character of the existing religions and ideologies could not be overcome and brought together in a 'global ethic'. In his view, it was easier to achieve a constitutional 'global organization' than a 'global ethic'. I mention this only as a footnote for those who might later be seeking genetic dependencies for the term 'global ethic', which by now has become widespread.

From what has been said so far it follows that as a systematic theologian, in my works orientated on the study of religion, I initially started more from questions of *faith* ('dogmatics') than from questions of *ethics* ('morality'), but that in the course of time it dawned on me that despite the 'dogmatic' differences between the religions, there are now already decisive common features in ethics which could be the foundation for a global ethic.

So at the beginning of the 1990s in every respect I was well prepared to take on tasks from which only a few years earlier I would certainly have been deterred: the preparation of a '*Declaration on a Global Ethic*' for the Parliament of the World Religions in Chicago in 1993 and the draft for a '*Declaration of Human Responsibilities*' of the InterAction Council of former heads of states and governments under the presidency of the former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt. The Declaration on a Global Ethic was to be made yet more specific by practical 'Calls' at a further parliament in Kapstadt (in December 1999).

Of course this whole development stimulated me, also to pay more attention to questions of ethics in the research project *On the Religious Situation of Our Time* and in particular to emphasize the common features in the ethics of the three Abrahamic religions. I did this in *Judaism* (1991), and *Christianity* (1994), and have continued to do so in the volume on *Islam* (2004). However, before completing the volume on Islam it seemed to me more important to develop the significance of the *Global Ethic for Global Politics and Global Economics* (1997) in a discussion of other theoretical and practical concepts.

The Global Ethic Project has been translated into yet another dimension by a *multimedia project* under the title *Tracing the way. Spiritual Dimensions of the World Religions*, which has been taken up in all continents. I prepared this as author and presenter in collaboration with Südwestrundfunk: it consists of a seven-

episode television series accompanied by a book on the film, video cassettes and a CD ROM. Without preparation extending over decades I would never have been able to take on this task, nor could I have prepared the informative mobile exhibition ‘*World Religions - World Peace - Global Ethic*’ with six large colour presentations of the six great religions and six others on the directives of the Declaration on a Global Ethic.

That finally brings us to the present and concludes this retrospect, which is not meant to become a forecast for the future.

Translated by Dr. John Bowden.

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For further information see the the *Global Ethic Foundation* in the internet:

www.global-ethic.org