

BOOK REVIEW

Küng, Hans. *Global Responsibility*. SCM Press, London, 1991.

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We consider ourselves to be living in an era of desperation. The world, we feel, is at an intolerable juncture, on the verge of some horrendous and inevitable collapse. There is no possibility, it is commonly agreed, of the world's continued existence without some conclusive solutions to the many problems that beset it. Yet, in the scheme of creation, our attitude is hardly an innovation. History enjoys a grim surfeit of people who have believed their own age to be world's last, of those who likened the world and all it contained to a swift arrow flying full forward to the terrible bulls eye of *krisis* or final judgment, of men who were convinced that the problems they faced were unprecedented in the brief and fleeting chronicle that is man's time on earth.

And from this milieu has sprung, unsurprisingly, a stern course of admonishing and millenarian literature, foretelling in one guise or another the Last Battle, the Rapture, the folding back of the heavens and the unleashing of Lucifer. There have been handbooks of advice, concerning the ways in which we might pull ourselves back from the rim of the fiery pit over which we so precariously look. It is this remedial, apocalyptic canon that has received a new addition, albeit a less eccentric one, in the form of *Global Responsibility - In Search of a New World Ethic*, a new work by theologian, former adviser to the Vatican and author Hans Küng. Küng's credentials are formidable and speak for themselves, and thus it is that when a theologian of his stature considers it a matter of urgency to call for our assistance in rescuing the world from the brink of destruction, we should give full and seemly attention to his proposals.

For Küng, and he urges the same view on us, this book is no mere treatise, no dry folio of theological sophistry, no polite murmur of academic self-indulgence. It is a bold text prepared in rapid response to an emergency. A manifesto. An ethical blueprint. A charter to which all must subscribe as a bare minimum if the world is to enter the third millenium as

anything more than the irradiated and deforested husk of a planet. The urgency and haste with which Küng seeks to convey this salvific document is even manifested in visual form, in a book that consists largely of bullet-points, brief report-style paragraphs, axiomatic chapter summaries, plenty of headings and sub-headings and a series of arguments that are reduced to simple, one-line statements which recur like refrains through the text. The New World Order requires a New World Ethic. Here is its book of grammar.

It is clearly the work of a man of the utmost integrity and conviction, one which cannot be read without some overwhelming sense of Küng's fundamental decency, acute intelligence, and eclectic scholarly reach. It is also a work that has been prepared with the noblest of motives.

But let us first set out Küng's essential dialectic, his three step guide to crisis management. It is: No survival without a world ethic. No world peace without peace between the religions. No peace between the religions without dialogue between the religions.

The last point is one that hardly anyone would contest and, in fact, interfaith dialogue is becoming commonplace. Küng's first two points, however, are advanced by him with a vigour and presumption which the reader may not share. The reader feels churlish, perhaps embarrassed, for growing uncertain in the face of Küng's exhortations, since the stakes set by Küng—no less than the continued existence of the planet—are rather high.

But to quote from the text, "confession of the truth includes the courage to recognize untruth and to say what it is." And so as men and women of faith, let us have the courage to admit, our heads hanging a little self-consciously, perhaps between quiet coughs, however much we would wish it otherwise and however much we would wish to concur on all points with an author both wise and notable, that firstly, the creation of a universal, global ethic would create problems as well as solving them.

Secondly, let us consider that the statement 'No world peace without peace between the religions' optimistically overestimates not only the ability of the organized religions, in relation to political, economic and military forces, to control (as opposed to sanctify or interpret) the course of global events but that it is also grounded on two debatable assumptions: that organized religion (as opposed to grace, or conversely humanitarianism) is sufficient a force to move and motivate the ungodly in the name of world peace; that all, as opposed to some, of those who claim to follow an organized

religion will actually fulfill the temporal dictates of their spiritual directors. That is to say, how many are the calls for peace that have already been made by the world's religious leaders which have gone utterly unheeded?

The goodness of K ung's call for reconciliation is movingly manifest, but it also quietly suggests itself to us that his perspective of the global crisis is that of the professional theologian, the ecumenical institute director, the UNESCO consultant and committee man, whose opinions are gathered from work in libraries, in conversations with distinguished colleagues and counterparts in the commercial and civil sectors, and through moving in the ecclesiastical circles of which he is part. The reader of *Global Responsibility* searches in vain for reasonable acknowledgement of the considerable forces stacked, with such darkness, against organized religion, or for the simple admission that in today's secular, technical and urban culture, the fire of religion burns dangerously low in the hearts of millions (even within hearts of those that claim to be religious) and that its reawakening cannot be assumed but, on the contrary, is an urgent challenge that churches must face.

We fruitlessly look also for recognition of, or sympathy with, the formidable power that lies at the heart of popular culture. And so to K ung's question "Who would be better suited today than the world's religions to mobilize millions of people for a world ethic?" we might not unreasonably murmur "Bob Geldof, CBS and the Green Movement," still others might add "the creative departments of Ogilvy & Mather and Leo Burnett," and not a few "the BBC World Service and Reader's Digest."

For despite its populist intentions, *Global Responsibility* never quite asserts the common touch, though there is a concession in the form of a reassuringly peppery foreword from the Duke of Edinburgh. Writes K ung: "the public has a right be addressed by academics and scientists on the spiritual and cultural situation of the time in clear, understandable language, without convoluted technical jargon and overqualifications which claim to be profundity." But, having asserted this, it becomes then an inexplicable oversight for K ung to use words and phrases such as these, gleaned for example from a cursory glance at the table of contents: 'paradigm shift,' 'application of the paradigm theory to the currents of religious systems,' 'Spengler's morphology of culture,' 'colloquium,' 'prolegomena,' 'praxis,' 'paratactically,' or indeed any other examples of the convoluted, technical jargon in which large portions of this work are written. Similarly, with re-

gard to “overqualifications” the following is a typical (but by no means the most extreme) example: “If we are to combine steadfastness and readiness for dialogue, we will first be able to describe an ecumenical position like this. What we have to strive for is...no relativism for which there is no Absolute and that prevents a productive co-existence of the various religions, and of relationality, which makes it possible to see every religion in its web of relationships.” This is excellent language for men and women with a professional or academic interest but, if we may be allowed to suggest it, the populist clarion call to a new world consciousness will not be composed in prose like this. For the time being, it seems, the Devil has catchier lines.

But essentially, then, the Küng blueprint for world salvation lies in a coalition of the world’s organized religions. Peace is a scheme, a diplomatic scenario to be negotiated on high between the *apparatchiks* of international religious hierarchies and then transmitted down through ecclesiastical infrastructures to the global flock, an interesting if singular proposal. We easily grant that Küng, in order to compress his thoughts into the slim volume that constitutes *Global Responsibility*, has in parts simplified his theories, but we cannot, uncomfortably as it seems, escape the desire to know more of how Küng would imagine such a proposal could so smoothly bypass or compel the vast and vested interests which organized religions must perforce deal with. These are secular and technocratic times, and Küng’s plan — of the world’s religious bureaucracies forming, as it were, an alternative United Nations — strikes us as the theologians honest bid to dovetail religion into a secular and technocratic milieu. But in doing so are we not guilty of overestimating the religious dimensions of contemporary conflicts? ‘No world peace without peace between the religions’ could be easily appended to read ‘No world peace without peace between the religions as well as the classes, the diplomats, the generals, the generations, those who would exploit the environment, the races and nationalities, the seekers of profit and the captains of industry,’ as well as any others from the innumerable pantheon of conflicting interests and parties that constitute our global society. In any case, ‘No world peace without peace between the religions’ is in some ways an odd statement, since religions are rarely if ever at war, but governments incessantly are. Wars have been fought in the name of religion, but in most cases these are not actually conflicts between the religions themselves, and this, naturally, is an important distinction that we must make an effort to retain in spite of the appealing emotiveness of Küng’s ecumenical catchphrase.

Küng is a fiercely sincere man, and a decent man, but in his attempt to formulate a populist articulation of his complex and broad-ranging theories in response to the global crisis, he also becomes a man imprisoned by his own scholasticism and theo-ecclesiastical outlook.

There is also, unsurprisingly, more than a touch of idealism permeating the ostensibly pragmatic pages of *Global Responsibility*. The book is after all dealing with no less a subject than the survival of the planet. But in places this does lead to conclusions that are banal when they should have been powerful. “We need” exhorts Küng in the final passage of the book “external dialogue of those who live in the same street or in the same village, work in the same factory or study in the same university.” The Second Coming excepted, we do not claim to have more inspiring alternatives for the salvation of the world, but it is fair to expect them of someone who presumes to advance a proposal for such a salvation. Man is a woefully finite creature, as the world is a finite place where sinners always outnumber the godly. Peace comes from within not without. The pure jets of love and contrition will bring more people together than any ecclesiastical bureaucracy can muster, and grace, not the temporal directives of the leaders of organized religions, will be the spur. Save the world, because it’s beautiful and it’s the only one we have. Love others and not yourself, because that is the only way you will be able to rise above the useless trash of your life. These are the cries to which we will rally, rather than ‘No survival without a world ethic’ or ‘No world peace without peace between the religions.’

Anyone who wants to rescue the planet should begin, at least, from here.