THE ETHICS OF JERUSALEM AND THE MORALS OF ATHENS: ASSESSING HANS KÜNG’S THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

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This essay will present and assess Hans Küng’s theological ethics. Küng is now retired from the University of Tübingen, but he continues to write prolifically. The first part of Küng’s career was devoted to ecumenical concerns between divided Christians. The middle stage saw a broadening interest in ecumenical issues between Christians and the world’s religions. Now, as his last legacy, Küng is occupied with an even greater ecumenical challenge between the world’s religions and the world’s political ideologies. The thesis of his latest project is stated tersely in this way: world survival depends upon a global ethic; a global ethic is not possible without religious peace; and religious peace is dependent upon interreligious dialogue. This proposal requires that Küng somehow combine specifically Christian ethics (the ethics of Jerusalem) with non-Christian and non-religious ethical systems (the morals of Athens).

The plan here is to first sketch the specific Christian component of Küng’s ethics. What makes Küng’s ethics ‘Christian’? Then, Küng’s proposal for a global ethic will be presented. Can there be a consensus between religious and non-religious peoples about a minimum of shared ethical principles? Afterwards, attention must be given to the components by which Küng connects these seemingly disparate ethical visions. Just how does Küng hold his ethical vision together? Remarks will be made along the way critically assessing Küng’s theological ethics.

1. THE ETHICS OF JERUSALEM: JESUS AND THE NEW HUMANISM

1. If we ask, “What makes ethics ‘Christian’?,” Küng would simply reply, “What is specifically Christian ... is the fact that all ethical requirements are understood in the light of the rule of the crucified Jesus Christ ... Jesus, to whom we are subordinated once and for all in baptism by faith, must remain Lord over us.” Jesus himself is the

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specifically Christian criterion for all ethical behavior. This position follows directly from Kün
g’s theological methodology, where Jesus is heralded as the norma normans (normative norm) for Christian theology. For Kün
g, all Christian moral reasoning and practice must be derived from the Gospel narratives and centered on the life, death and resurrec
tion Jesus of Nazareth. It is, therefore, important to give a profile of Kün
g’s Jesus before proceeding to how Kün
g’s christology functions in making ethical proposals. The connec
tion between christology, ethics and ecclesiology should also be noted. The praxis of the Church in any age or culture, Kün
g maintains, should be grounded and guided by the pattern of radical discipleship modeled in Jesus of Nazareth. Kün
g employs the notions of “loyal opposition” and “critical catalyst” to depict the Christian relationship to the Church and the world. The ideas of “loyal opposition” and “critical catalyst” flow out of Kün
g’s reading of the Gospel narratives and his interpretation of Jesus.

A. Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of a New Humanism

If all ethical requirements are to be understood in the light of the crucified and resurrec
ted Jesus, as Kün
g argues, the question arises, “Which Jesus?” Kün
g’s Jesus is derived from a narrative reading of the “characteristic features and outlines of Jesus message, behavior, and fate.” He is confident that historical-critical methods of interpretation pro
duce a relatively adequate record of Jesus from the NT documents. Kün
g observes two essential features about the “real” Jesus from his investigation of the Gospels. First, Jesus was Jewish and was loyal to the Jewish tradition. Second, Jesus was opposed to the way Judaism was practiced.

Kün
g’s “real” Jesus is essentially an apocalyptic Jewish prophet who preached the king
dom of God, taught a radical ethic of love and showed solidarity with moral failures, the exploited, the marginalized, the non-religious, the demonized, children and sick people. Kün
g sums up the teaching of the “real” Jesus as: “Jesus made the cause of the God of Israel his own, governed by the typically apocalyptic expectation of living in an end-time, in which God himself will very soon appear on the scene and impose his will, establish his rule and realize his kingdom. Jesus wanted to announce in advance this kingdom, this rule, this will of God, with a view to human salvation. This alone he made the criteria.”

Kün
g goes on to summarize the ethical component of Jesus’ teaching in this way: “So he [Jesus] called not only for the renewed observance of God’s commandments but for a love which in individual instances extends to unselfish service without hierarchy, to renunciation even without receiving anything in return, to boundless forgiving. It is a love which even includes the opponent, the enemy: love of God and love of neighbor in accordance with the criterion of self-love (‘as yourself’). Jesus did not preach himself, but the cause of God, the will of God, God’s program. God’s program, Kün
g maintains, is absolutely congruent with the cause of humanity. It was not a ‘new law’ which may be reduced to Halakah nor separated from Haggadah. God’s program, in fact, becomes the basis for a radical new humanism where being a Christian means being fully human, not less human.

The life and message of Jesus were opposed by the leading Jewish options within Judaism. Jesus functioned as a “critical catalyst” within his own Jewish social context because he did not belong to any of the reigning ecclesiastical groups of his day. Kün
g
expresses it this way, Jesus was “caught in the cross of co-ordinates of options within Judaism.” What is meant is that Jesus is not presented in the NT as a priest of the religious-political establishment like the Sadducees; nor as a political revolutionary like the Zealots; nor as some kind of ascetic monk like the Essences. Moreover, the NT does not situate Jesus within the company of the devout moralists, the Pharisees. So, Küng concludes that: “it shows considerable understanding of Jesus if we do not attempt to integrate him within the quadrilateral of establishment and revolution, emigration and compromise: He fits no formula. He is provocative, both on the right and on the left: apparently closer than priests to God. At the same time freer than the ascetics in regard to the world. More moral than the moralists. And more revolutionary than the revolutionaries.”10 Jesus’ life and teaching led to his crucifixion. Despite Jesus’ loyalty to the house of Israel, he was crucified as a criminal of the State. Nonetheless, the cross became a summons to discipleship, to a life of self-giving and service to others. In fact, according to Küng, the cross is now the normative element and pattern for determining what is Christian about ethics.

B. The Call to Discipleship: “Follow Jesus!”

Küng maintains that the entire practice of individual Christians and Christian churches should be oriented toward the message and behavior, the cross and resurrection of Jesus as the model for what is Christian. Following Jesus in one’s moral life, therefore, is basic to Christian discipleship. Küng heralds Jesus as the standard, the supreme norm, the chief source and final criterion for what it means to be Christian—not an infallible pope, the magisterium, church councils, church tradition, natural law or canon law. Küng departs from traditional Roman Catholic moral theology at this point. While it is not the theme of this essay, it must be said here that the parallels between Küng’s Jesus and his own stance toward the Roman Catholic Church are unmistakable. It was Küng’s christology, not his ecclesiology, that ultimately led to the removal of his missio canonica, his official license to teach Roman Catholic theology.11

The specific Christian norm, then, is the concrete, historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, not some abstract ethical system or universal moral code. Küng points out that what distinguishes Jesus from the founders of other religions or ideologies is that the person and teaching of Jesus cannot be separated. He says, “the following of Christ is what distinguishes Christians from other disciples and supporters of great men, in the sense that Christians are ultimately dependent on this person, not only his teaching, but also his life, death, and new life.”12 Jesus was more than a rabbi or teacher. Jesus was the living, normative embodiment of the cause of God. In fact, Küng asserts that there was a harmony of will and revelation between Jesus and God without any contradiction. The one who proclaimed the kingdom, also embodied the kingdom. On this basis, Christians are able to justify and substantiate a new attitude, a new way of life, a new approach to life as well as a different set of values and a radical new humanism. The focus upon Jesus, Küng argues, is much more convincing than an impersonal idea, an abstract principle, a universal norm or a purely theoretical system of ethics. Indeed, the genius of Christian ethics, Küng maintains, is that it is rooted in a concrete, historical person. For, the person of Jesus possesses an “impressiveness,” an “audibility” and a “realizability” that is lacking in eternal
ideas, abstract principles, universal norms, conceptual systems and in unattainable, unrealis-
istic ideals.13

To say that Jesus is the specific, supreme norm of Christian ethics, however, needs to
be qualified in order to be more precise about how Jesus functions as the norm of
Christian ethics. Küng argues: ‘... it is of little use to appeal to absolute norms and simple
rules, deduced from natural law or Scripture, in order to solve the apparently almost insol-
uble problems and conflicts of humanity....’" Küng does not think that Jesus gives
absolute answers to every moral dilemma humanity faces. The formation of Christian
ethical norms and moral attitudes occurs within the larger context and process of social-
ization within the Christian community. This means that the specifically Christian aspect
of “following Jesus” must be worked out tensively in one’s own existential situation and
not by universalizing or absolutizing some particular ethical demand of Jesus. Technically,
Küng suggests, we are not called to “imitate Jesus” but to “follow Jesus” (nachfolgen). Jesus
illuminates our situation. Our situation, however, shapes how we are to apply the norm
of Jesus. The ethical process, therefore, is reciprocal, not one-sided. What is essential is
that the Christian look to Jesus and allow him to inform and shape his or her action in a
given situation. The context where the Christian learns this process is the Christian com-
munity. The role of the Church, however, is not to dictate or mandate moral action. The
Church’s role is simply to teach and preach the Gospel and model Christian behavior.

C. Is Something Missing from Küng’s Christian Ethics?

Two specific remarks need to be made regarding Küng’s specifically Christian ethics.
First, I applaud the fact that Küng’s theological ethics are essentially christocentric. The
norm of Christian moral behavior is located in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.
While questions may be raised about aspects of Küng’s historical reconstruction of the
“real” Jesus, he is right to place Jesus within the context of Palestinian Judaism and stress a
fundamental continuity between Jesus and Judaism. Küng also correctly points out that
Jesus had serious tensions with Judaism due to unfaithfulness to the higher things of the
Law. Küng’s Jesus is an apocalyptic prophet calling for love, justice and mercy, a reversal
of values and non-violent resistance that led to his crucifixion (very similar to the Jesus of
E. P. Sanders’). It is this historically reconstructed Jesus that is the norma romans of
Küng’s theological ethics. Herein lies a problem. Küng’s historically reconstructed Jesus,
“real” or not, is too fragile and too narrow a foundation to build a robust Christian under-
standing of the moral life. It is fragile in that historical inquiry can only yield tentative and
conflicting results, whereas ethical living requires a high degree of moral authority and
conviction to motivate and sustain moral action. I agree with Richard Hays’ comment
that: “...it makes sense to claim modestly that New Testament ethics will find a more sta-
ble starting place if we begin with the moral visions of the individual texts than if we try
to begin by reconstructing Jesus.”16 Moreover, Küng’s reconstructed Jesus is a narrow
foundation in that Christian ethics is bound not only to the Gospels but to the entire NT
witness as canon. Hence, the full canonical text of Scripture is missing in Küng’s theologi-
cal ethics.

Second, while Küng emphasizes following Jesus and the cross as normative for
Christian discipleship and ethics, there are ethical components of Christian doctrine that
are either muted or completely ignored. For example, one does not find in Kün
g’s discussion any extensive treatment of the ethical implications of human bondage to sin, God’s
to liberate us from the power of sin, or God’s provision for the possibility of obedience
through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is for Kün a concrete moral example and he challenges us to follow Jesus in our concrete discipleship. One gets the
impression, however, that Kün’s call to follow Jesus is an unconditional ethical demand
that Christians can simply apply to their situation and live successfully from the their own
human resources. Jesus is our external model, norm and standard for discipleship and
ethics. But something more than an external model is needed for humanity to act and
behave after the pattern of Jesus. The same Spirit who empowered Jesus is available to
moral failures to help them do what they cannot achieve in their own strength. As
Gordon Fee correctly observes, “truly Christian ethics can only be by the Spirit’s empow-
ering.”

The Spirit’s empowering presence is fundamental to any Christian ethic. Without the Spirit, we are powerless and weak to overcome our sinful nature and habits
by our own human resources.

2. The Morals of Athens: Search for a Global Ethic

Some aspects of Kün’s Christian ethics sound as if an Anabaptist ethicist could have written it. But things get more complex when we turn to his project for a global ethic.
Hans Kün’s interests have always been world scale and comprehensive. Even in Kün’s
ey early period, when he wrote predominately on ecclesiology and received the Nihil obsta-
t and Imprimatur, Kün never lost sight of the world horizon or the fact that the Church
exists “...in the world for the world.” This is true of Kün’s theological ethics, as well. He
is not content to write as a Christian theologian exclusively for the Church. Nor has
Kün aspired to be a “theologian’s theologian,” one who writes to assuage the exclusive
interests and inquiries of the academy. Kün is a practical theologian. He writes pro-
grammatic theory with concrete and pragmatic ends in view. The proposal for a global
ethic is an extension of the fact that Hans Kün is self-consciously a “catholic” (i.e., univer-
sal) theologian. We will first deal with the development of Kün’s global ethic as a pro-
grammatic agenda. Then, we will see how Kün’s proposal for a new world ethic devel-
oped into a declaration about the world’s religions. Finally, we examine how Kün’s glob-
al ethic addresses global politics and economics.

A. The Proposal for a New World Ethic

The concept of a “world ethic” (Weltethos) developed gradually in Kün’s thought. The
first stage of formation was the connection Kün made between world peace and interre-
ligious dialogue. World peace, Kün realized, is contingent upon establishing peace
among the world’s religions. At an interreligious conference at Temple University in
1984, Kün condensed his thoughts into programmatic theses: “No world peace without
peace among the religions, no peace among the religions without dialogue between the
religions, and no dialogue between the religions without accurate knowledge of one
another.” These theses were the driving force behind Kün’s two major books on inter-
religious dialogue, Christianity and the World Religions and Christianity and Chinese
Religions. As Kün reflected further upon the world situation, he was convinced that
these theses must be developed into a formal program, one that could make a significant contribution towards world survival. He tested his initial proposal for a global ethic twice before UNESCO (1989, 1991) and once before the World Economic Forum (1990). The latter meeting included a dialogue with Küng, Hans Jonas and Karl-Otto Apel.

The project for a new world ethic was programmatically presented in Küng’s book, Projekt Weltethos (1990). It has the English title, Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic. The word “ethos,” translated here as “ethic,” does not so much denote a system of ethics as a way of life. The first part of the book outlines the paradigm shift from modernity to postmodernity and deals with the threat to world survival and the need for a global ethic. He explains that after the failure of “State socialism,” “neocapitalism” and “Japanism,” we are at an end of the great modern humanistic ideologies of “political-social revolution” and “technological evolution.” The ideology of progress has been “demythified” in this century of two world wars and the Holocaust. The survival of the world is now threatened by proliferating military aggression, hunger, extinction of animal life, world economic catastrophe, depletion of rain forests and increased global warming. Concomitant with these issues, Küng assesses that the world is in moral crisis. Many people no longer know a basis from which they may make moral decisions. Consequently, they are confronted with personal and social nihilism in every facet of human existence. The paradigm change from modernity to postmodernity is disruptive.

Given this analysis of the world situation, Küng proposes that what the world needs is some kind of “minimal basic consensus” that affirms core values, norms and attitudes. Otherwise, there can be no possibility of peaceful coexistence, let alone any real democracy. What is needed is an ethic that is global in perspective and mandates “planetary responsibility” as a Kantian categorical imperative. Küng acknowledges that this task is too great for any one religious tradition. It requires, by its very nature, a coalition between believers and non-believers, religious and secular people alike. Everyone has a stake in world survival; so everyone is responsible to work to achieve it. The world’s religions play a particularly important role in providing the foundation and resources for a global ethic. Küng’s proposal for a new world ethic and global responsibility requires a transcendent ground, a ground that is not itself conditioned. Küng is confident that such a transcendent ground may be discovered among the world’s religious traditions. He queries, “...who would be better suited today than the world religions to mobilize millions of people for a world ethic? To mobilize them by formulating ethical aims, presenting key moral ideas and motivating them both rationally and emotionally, so that the ethical norms can also be lived out in practice?”23 The world’s religions, then, serve as the source and foundation from which a basic consensus of universal moral values, norms and attitudes may be derived. But will the world’s religious traditions accept Küng’s proposal for a new world ethic?

B. The Declaration of a New World Ethic

After much experience in interreligious dialogue and extensive research into the world’s religions, Küng was convinced that the world’s religions could supply the moral basis and spiritual resources needed for a new world ethic. But how could Küng make his programmatic agenda for a new world ethic concrete and realizable in a global con-
text? He could only do so if leaders in the world’s religious traditions would embrace and promote the idea of a global ethic. But where was there a forum to present the idea of a new world ethic to a wide variety of religious traditions and their leaders? Künig found that forum at the Parliament of the World’s Religions which met in Chicago in 1993. He was invited to draft a declaration for a common ethic that could be adopted by the various religious traditions attending the Parliament.24

Künig’s draft was discussed by the Council of the Parliament and by others from various religious traditions. Eventually, Künig’s text was accepted by the Board of Trustees (with some minor revisions) as what would become the “Declaration Toward a Global Ethic.” The delegates attending the Parliament would discuss and debate the prospects for a global ethic and be asked to endorse the declaration formally. The real test for Künig’s global ethic was whether or not such diverse groups as Muslims, the Fellowship of Isis, Greek Orthodox Christians, Shintos, the Theosophical Society and neo-pagans could come to a consensus about a minimum of shared ethical principles. After a number of objections were considered, the “Declaration Toward a Global Ethic” was signed by the majority of the delegates, including the Dalai Lama, the Roman Catholic Cardinal of Chicago, the Vatican representative, the representative from the World Council of Churches and many other wide ranging groups and individuals. Evangelical and conservative Christian groups did not attend. They were suspicious of the syncretistic nature of the Parliament. Moreover, Evangelicals and conservative Christians had serious problems participating in some of the planned activities (such as neo-pagan moon worship).

As for the declaration itself, it began by citing the need for a global ethic in our contemporary world and by calling for commitment to “a minimal fundamental consensus concerning binding values, irrevocable standards, and fundamental moral attitudes” as a basis for a global ethic.25 A basic demand of the declaration is: “Every human being must be treated humanely.” The declaration then put forward some “irrevocable directives” of human behavior to promote a more humane world. The minimal ethic proposed for a global ethic is summed up in the following general principles of the Declaration:

1. Commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life.
2. Commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order.
3. Commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness.
4. Commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women.26

Each of these directives is followed by explications and representative examples of how to live out the directive in concrete human experience. The conclusion of the declaration calls for a fundamental “transformation of consciousness” whereby all men and woman are encouraged to commit themselves “... to a common global ethic, to a better mutual understanding, as well as to socially-beneficial, peace-fostering, and Earth-friendly ways of life.”27 Künig was encouraged by the interest in and support of a global ethic by those attending the Parliament of World Religions and by the serious consideration it received in the aftermath.28 Yet it remained for him to be more specific as to how a global ethic could be applied to our world situation. To address this, Künig turned his attention to the practical domain of global politics and economics.
C. The Application of a New World Ethic

Küng selected the arenas of global politics and economics to demonstrate the applicability of his proposal for a new world ethic. His book, *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics*\(^9\), reads more like a book from a political science or economics professor than from a theologian. The first section deals with global politics while the second treats global economics. In both sections, Küng surveys and analyzes the historic background to the present world situation. In typical Küngian fashion, he posits two extreme positions and suggests a via media. His proposed paradigm of politics and economics is centered around the theme of responsibility. In conclusion to each section, Küng suggests several specific proposals indicating how a global ethic could benefit global politics and economics. Küng adds a chapter discussion to the section on global politics that indicates the positive role the world’s religions could play in the practice of diplomacy and the peace process. Space is available only to give a summary sketch of how Küng’s new world ethic applies to global politics and economics respectively.

Küng envisions two opposite poles in global politics. One side of the pole emphasizes realism and power politics. This is represented by the power politics of Henry Kissinger, the Machiavellian politics of Cardinal de Richelieu, the practical Realpolitik of Otto von Bismarck and the power management theory of Hans J. Morgenthau. At the other pole is the idealistic politics of Woodrow Wilson, who sought to subordinate politics to morality. Küng proposes an ethic of responsibility where the ‘political calculation’ of realistic politics is combined with and tempered by the ethical judgments of an idealistic politics. Küng bases his thinking here on the ethics of responsibility outlined by Max Weber and Hans Jonas.\(^{10}\) His logic is that a global society needs a global ethic where some consensus on moral values, criteria and attitudes inform our global political decisions. Without a global ethic informing global politics, democracy in the global village will not survive Machiavellian power politics. But where do we find global ethical standards? He gravitates toward the political theory of Michael Walzer, and away from those of Rawls and Habermas. Walzer, like Küng, seeks to find a via media between realist and idealist politics by building upon a “core morality,” a “minimal” or “thin” ethic.\(^{31}\) Küng, however, goes beyond Walzer to suggest that a more universal ethic for politics is the golden rule (= “do to others what you want them to do to you”), which is expressed in different ways in various traditions. In addition, Küng suggests that the four general ethical directives of the Declaration Toward a Global Ethic (noted above) would also provide moral orientation for global politics.

Next, the global economy is divided up into two opposite poles as well. Küng believes that the globalization of the world economy is “unavoidable,” “ambivalent,” “unpredictable” and able to be “controlled.”\(^{12}\) His logic in economics is the same as that in politics. If the world is moving toward a global economy with global businesses and technology, then the world needs a global ethic based on a basic ethical consensus to guide honest business practices and a just distribution of wealth. On the one side of this pole is the failed welfare state system. Sweden provides Küng with an example of a welfare state in shambles with poor economic growth, high unemployment and weak currency. Küng does not want to abandon the welfare state system totally, however. His idea is to restructure it for greater effectiveness. At the other pole is the neocapitalism of the USA
and England. Küng does not think that neocapitalism, with its emphasis upon the profit motive, has produced a better model for responsible economic life than that of the welfare state.

After examining the American situation, Küng agrees with the analysis of Zbigiew Brzezinski, former Security Advisor to President Carter, that the balance sheet on neocapitalism reveals major flaws: financial indebtedness, trade deficit, low savings, noncompetitiveness, low productivity, poor health care, deficient public education, decaying social infrastructure, a greedy upper class, heightened litigation, race and poverty problems, pervasive crime and increased violence, a massive drug culture, social helplessness, sexual license, moral corruption through the media, divisive multiculturalism, decline in civil consciousness, political gridlock and spiritual emptiness. In the light of this list, Küng concludes that economic policies need moral direction. Küng pleads for responsible economic policies that work toward more just social conditions and ones that factor in environmental concerns.

In addition to collaboration between cultures and shared commitments of those cultures to human rights and democracy, Küng points to the moral and spiritual values of the world’s religions as an indispensable resource for a responsible global economics. The religious traditions speak in one way or another about serving others, a commitment to a just economic order, dealing honestly and fairly in business and prohibiting theft. Küng implores businesses, business managers and business ethicists to tap into the ethical resources of the world’s religions. He offers this parting piece of advice: “In the long term an immoral way of doing business does not pay.”

D. Is Küng’s Global Ethic Project Plausible?

Hans Küng must be commended for his efforts toward a global ethic. Who can disagree with the ideal of world peace, treating people more humanely, just economic distribution, responsible attitudes toward the environment or more friendly relations between the world’s religions? The world is in moral crisis. Human society certainly needs help. Küng is to be credited not only for these efforts but also for alerting statesmen and political leaders to the positive value and role that religion can play in reaching these moral goals for society. Nonetheless, there are two aspects of Küng’s project that present plausibility problems.

First, Küng’s quest for minimal values, norms and attitudes from particular religions and cultures that are at the same time universally binding ethical values, norms and attitudes is strained. Küng hopes to discover common categorical imperatives that are trans-national, trans-cultural, universally binding ethical values, norms and standards from a consensus of religions and cultures as the minimum foundation for a global ethic. In addition, Küng seeks to ground these common ethical values, norms and attitudes in a transcendent ground, which he calls “God.” Without this ground, he admits, ethics and morality are at best relative. Yet, Küng also says that he is not seeking absolute standards of morality or a unitary ethical ideology, but only a sober and modest way to address the needs and worries of the modern age by striving for “a new basic consensus of integrative humane convictions.” Küng here backs away from absolute, universal moral standards grounded in a transcendent reality and retreats to the notion of human “consensus.” The dilemma is that it is
impossible to derive divinely grounded universal standards of morality from relative human consensual convictions found in world religions and cultures. Religions and cultures are relative. Thus, Künz is looking for universal standards, norms and values among relative standards, norms and values. To acknowledge that universal, trans-national, trans-cultural categorical moral imperatives exist and need to be grounded in a transcendent reality is to concede that some particular objective, absolute standard of moral truth exists, is knowable and is to some extent known in human history. This is exactly what the Jewish and Christian traditions claim. But this is certainly not the moral understanding of “consensus” thinkers in Western culture. Nor is it the teaching of many world religions. Künz’s talk of “consensus” suggests that he is vulnerable to the same criticisms he made against Habermas and Rawls. Here, I agree with the critique of Nicholas Rescher, who forcefully argues that consensus “is not a criterion of truth, is not a standard of value, is not an index of moral or ethical appropriateness, is not a requisite for co-operation, is not, in and of itself, an appropriate ideal.” While the ideals of Künz’s project are worthy, “consensus” is not a valid ideal upon which to found universal ethics. It is, therefore, difficult to see how Künz’s project provides a plausible framework for a global ethic by setting the foundation for universal moral imperatives upon the shifting sands of human consensus.

Second, the four irrevocable directives for human behavior in the Declaration Toward a Global Ethic are so general that as each tradition interprets these directives, there is little real gain on “consensus.” The problem is that as we shift from the general principle to more specific definitions, interpretations and concrete applications of the directive in the specific religions and cultures, then irreconcilable differences begin to emerge. For example, the first irrevocable directive suggests a commitment to a “culture of non-violence and respect for life.” This is based upon the religious-ethical prescript “Thou shall not kill!” or, stated positively, “Have respect for life!” We are told that “armament is a mistaken path; disarmament is the commandment of the times” and that humans, animals and plants deserve “protection, preservation, and care.” There is no consensus among Christians, let alone the other world religions, on what “Thou shall not kill” or “Have respect for life” means. One need look no further than the death penalty and abortion issues in the USA to realize that this directive itself is not sufficient to settle heated and sometimes violent disagreements among Christians. Moreover, is not this directive admittedly easier for Theravadin Buddhists than for Shi’ite Muslims and most Christians (with the exception of the Anabaptist tradition)? And what does it mean practically to protect, preserve and care for animals and plants? Does this mean that animals and plants are not to be killed for food, clothing, medical testing or other human uses? If not, what practical guidelines are given for ethical treatment of animals and plants? These and other such problems can be raised about the four irrevocable directives of the Declaration Toward a Global Ethic. Due to their very general formulation, the irrevocable directives lose moral force as they are interpreted and contextualized.

With all this emphasis upon global ethics, world religions, politics, and economics, some might be wondering if Künz has forgotten a specific commitment to the Christian faith. In the middle of his book on global politics and economics, however, Künz offers this personal confession: “in the face of all the darkness of the world and the Church, Jesus Christ stands as ‘the light of the world’, ‘the light of men’, as ‘our light’: ‘The light of
life) shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it’…. In company with many others I openly concede that during the long decades of my life as a theologian I personally would hardly have survived so long in the face of so much darkness in the world and the Church without this light, which in my fragile humanity has always been for me ‘the way, the truth and the life’.”\(^9\) It is from this Christian center that Kün
g has sought to construct a global ethic. He meets the world on its own turf and in its own terms. Kün
g does so, however, as a Christian theologian. But how does Kün
g relate this project for a global ethic to his specific Christian ethics and following Jesus? This question is the theme of the next section.

3. **BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN JERUSALEM & ATHENS**

Kün
g is conscious of the apparent disparity of combining the ethics of Jerusalem (specifically Christian ethics) to the morals of Athens (non-Christian and non-religious moral thinking). He finds no contradiction, however, in joining these two into a unified ethical vision. In addressing this issue, Kün
g comments: “Clearly a universal human ethic and a specifically Christian ethic are not mutually exclusive.”\(^10\) But the question of how Kün
g couples a general, universal ethic to a specifically Christian ethic is not clear. On what basis does he bridge the gap between Jerusalem and Athens? And how does he retain a unified ethical vision?

There are at least five features of Kün
g’s theology that serve as bridge components between his specifically Christian ethics and his global ethic project. Kün
g nowhere presents these features of his theology in a coherent system. However, these components are entirely commensurate with his thinking and aid in understanding how he unifies his ethical vision. The five bridge components are derived from aspects of Kün
g’s natural theology, anthropology, theological method, conception of truth, and his employment of Hegel’s dialectical method. These five components are likened to a bridge with five planks. A brief exposition of how each functions will reveal that these bridge components are the essential components that provide cohesion to Kün
g’s theological ethics.

A. **The Natural Theology Plank**

The first bridge component of Kün
g’s theological ethics is derived from his natural theology. Kün
g takes neither a strong “foundationalist” approach to natural theology characteristic of Vatican I nor a “fideistic” approach along the lines of Karl Barth. God, as the creator of the world, may be discovered in a limited way from creation. This means that God’s self-revelation and human experience of that revelation are not antithetical. Revelation occurs through human experience, not apart from it. Kün
g finds support for a “soft” natural theology within Scripture (Rom 1:18-21, 2:14-16; Acts 14:17, 17:27; John 1:9; Hebrews 11). His conclusion is that a true, but limited, knowledge of God may be derived from creation apart from the special revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Knowledge of God, therefore, is, in principle, universal in scope and can be a resource for ethical principles as well as provide a basis for moral action. Belief in God is nourished by an ultimately justified fundamental trust in reality. God is not only the guarantor of the reality of reason and the rationality of reason, but also is the ground upon which ethics and the moral life are ultimately founded. He says, “The very last and first reality, God,
must be assumed if a person in the last resort wants to live a meaningful moral life. God’s reality is the condition of the possibility of a moral autonomy of man in secular society.”41 Küng maintains that theonomy is the essential condition for the possibility of moral autonomy. In this way, a “soft” natural theology provides one plank of continuity between specifically Christian ethics and a universal global ethic.

**B. The Humanum Plank**

The second cohesive bridge component is Küng’s conception of the humanum. He believes that there is a continuity between being Christian and being human. While he does not simply equate being human with being Christian, Küng thinks that being Christian does not mean that one is less human. Being human and being Christian are complementary and mutually beneficial to one another. True religion, Küng affirms, and true humanity exist in dialectical tension. He remarks, “True humanity is the presupposition for true religion” and “true religion is the fulfillment of true humanity.”42 The concept “humanum” denotes human dignity, worth and value. It is the central ethical criterion by which Küng evaluates and determines what is good and bad, true and false, valuable and valueless in the world’s religions and ideologies. If something promotes and protects human dignity, value and worth, then it is regarded as true, good and valuable. If, however, something destroys or suppresses human dignity, value and worth, it is false, bad and valueless. The concept of the humanum functions in this way as a general ethical criterion for all religions and ideologies. As a result, Küng views the humanum (human dignity, value and worth) as a universally binding and unconditional ethical criterion. Moreover, the general ethical criterion, the humanum, is not regarded by Küng as being in conflict with the specific ethical criterion for Christians, Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus Christ is considered the supreme concrete example of the formal category “the humanum.” Jesus Christ gives an impressive, audible and realizable quality to the abstract notion of the humanum. Since Jesus provides the supreme example of human dignity, value and worth, there is no disjunction for Küng between Christian ethics and a global ethic oriented toward the humanum.

**C. The Correlation Method Plank**

The third bridge component that brings cohesion to Küng’s theological ethics is his theological methodology. Küng’s theological methodology stands in the tradition of revisionist theologians Paul Tillich, David Tracy and Edward Schillebeeckx. Each of these, in different ways, employs the method of correlation. The method of correlation suggests two main sources for Christian theology: divine revelation and human experience. This method also posits a basic continuity between divine revelation and human experience. This basic continuity, however, does not imply that divine revelation and human experience never conflict. What it does suggest is that there is a relative harmony between the revelation of God in creation and the revelation of God in scripture. The method of correlation, therefore, is congruent with a “soft” natural theology and accounts for why Küng takes seriously the world horizon within Christian theology. The world situation with its varied human experiences is viewed as a potential source for the knowledge of God. Küng’s theological method, however, departs from the correlation tradition in one very
important respect. It includes alongside a “mutually critical correlation” space for a “mutually critical confrontation.” Divine revelation and human experience, Kung maintains, are not always compatible. What is one to do if there exists a critical confrontation between divine revelation and human experience? This is an interesting problematic for any theological method, but especially for methods of correlation. How exactly does one adjudicate the truth of conflicting moral claims between divine revelation and human experience? Kung argues that Christian theologians must opt for the norm of truth found in Jesus Christ in a critical confrontation. He says, “What then should decide the issue in the crucial first-and-last questions affecting man and humanity? The biblical experiences, the Christian message, the Gospel, Jesus Christ himself. For this Christ Jesus is in person the ‘essence of Christianity, the ‘Christian message, the ‘Gospel’ itself, indeed God’s ‘Word,’ ‘made flesh.” Kung’s theological method of correlation, even while affirming Jesus as the ultimate norm for assessing truth, advocates a basic continuity between the moral truth in Jesus and moral truth found in human experience.

D. The Differentiated Truth Plank

If Jesus Christ is the norm of moral truth, how is he related to the moral truth found in the global context? This question leads to the fourth bridge component of Kung’s theological ethics, his differentiated conception of truth. Kung discusses his conception of truth while formulating ecumenical criteria for determining truth in the world’s religions. The question of truth is important to him because the issue of conflicting moral truth claims arises in the search for a moral consensus among believers and non-believers. Kung is of the opinion that truth is ontologically unified. He maintains: “The truth cannot be different in the different religions, but only one: through all the contradictions, we have to seek what is complementary; through all the exclusions, what is inclusive.” There is no consensus on what criteria could be employed to adjudicate the conflicting moral truth claims among the religions. Nonetheless, Kung assembles a set of criteria for evaluating truth in the world’s religions. The criteria he employs are: (1) the general ethical criterion of the humanum; (2) the general religious criterion of the authentic or canonical; and (3) the specifically Christian criterion—Jesus Christ. The first criterion is ethical in nature and has already been discussed above. In sum, a religious claim or behavior cannot be true if it does not promote human dignity, value and worth. The second criterion suggests that for religious beliefs and practices to be true, they must at least measure up to their own authoritative teachings or canons. The third criterion, Jesus Christ, applies to Christian believers only.

These three criteria are augmented by two perspectives of truth, which results in a “differentiated” conception of truth. The first dimension of truth is the external or outside perspective. From this standpoint, the “objective” outsider view, there are many different true and good religions. The external dimension of truth is correlated with the search for a global ethic where the general ethical criterion of the humanum and the general religious criterion of the canonical function as “minimal requirements” for the truth of any religion. From this perspective, Kung comments, “As a religion Christianity appears in world history just as relative as all other religions.” There exists, however, another dimension of truth. Kung calls this the internal or inside perspective from the Christian point of view. This corresponds to Kung’s specifically Christian ethics and the specifically Christian criterion of
Jesus Christ. From the Christian standpoint, there is only one ultimately true ethical criterion—Jesus Christ. Küng is quick to add that the truth of Christianity does not monopolize or diminish truth in other religions. That is, as long as Christian truth claims are not flatly contradicted. Küng does not mean to suggest by his differentiated conception of truth that truth itself is pluralistic or differentiated. He means that our human perceptions of truth are relative in nature. Only God has an objective, undifferentiated view of truth. Because human perception of truth is differentiated, Küng reasons, true ethical teachings within Christianity may be combined, although not completely harmonized with, the moral teachings and ethical practices found in the world’s religions toward a world ethic.

E. The Hegelian Dialectic Plank

The fifth and last bridge component to consider is Küng’s use of Hegel’s dialectical method of “sublation.” Hans Küng is a theologian of the via media. Hegel’s dialectical method is one of his favorite devices for navigating the via media and has been employed in each of the four bridge components above either explicitly or implicitly. This fact is key to understanding how Küng combines a specifically Christian ethic with universal-global morality from the world’s religions and secularist thought. The Hegelian dialectical method of sublation is Küng’s primary tool for resolving conflicts and incompatibilities in interreligious dialogue. He says: “...the goal of interreligious dialogue is not a compounding of various features from various religions, nor a mingling of gods (theocracy), nor a fusing of religions, but, rather, a dialectical ‘transcending’ (Aufheben) of conflicts through inner mediation, which at once includes affirming, denying, and overcoming antagonistic positions.”

What is said here about interreligious dialogue applies equally well to how Küng couples his Christian ethics to his project for a global ethic. The link is Hegel’s dialectical method of sublation.

The word “sublation” is derived from the German Aufhebung, which is very difficult to translate into English. Küng nowhere explains the concept in detail, but comments that sublation means more than the combination of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. He suggests that sublation is “the affirmation of a truth that turns into a denial and then again into a transcending of both affirmation and denial.” Edward Quinn, one of Küng’s translators, thinks that “sublation” is best understood as something that cancels, preserves, elevates and transfigures all at the same moment. The dialectical method requires that no proposition be wholeheartedly denied or uncritically affirmed without qualification. Moreover, sublation has the positive aim of mediating polar opposites. It is easy to understand why Küng employs Hegel’s method of sublation in his global ethic project. For by it, he hopes to take all the moral teachings found in the world’s religions and secularist thought, affirm the relative truth found in each, deny the absolute claims of each, and, then, transcend and elevate each into a unified global ethic. Each of the bridge components above is contingent upon the success of Hegel’s dialectical method of sublating opposites and rendering antinomies compatible.

F. How Stable Is Küng’s Bridge?

Küng is an ecumenical theologian par excellence. What makes him such is his keen insight into what divides Christians, the world’s religions and secular worldviews. He is
quick to get to the heart of issues. Küng’s mind habitually locates the central antinomies between views. In fact, most of his books deal with problematics that are construed as polar opposites. It is also Küng’s natural impulse to formulate a mediating position between polar opposites. The assumption that underlies Küng’s mediation impulse is that God is the ultimate source of all truth and our capacity for knowing anything at all in the world stems from God. It is from this viewpoint that Küng can affirm a fundamental continuity between natural and revealed revelation, between being human and being Christian, between divine revelation and human experience and between truth in the world and ‘Christian’ truth. There is much to agree with here. However, space only allows for two critical remarks regarding these bridge components between Jerusalem and Athens. It is possible to cross from Jerusalem to Athens on the planks provided. But it is much like crossing over a great chasm on a wobbly rope bridge with two very weak boards. The two major weak planks are Küng’s conception of truth and his use of Hegel’s dialectical method.

First, Küng’s differentiated conception of truth has two major flaws. The first major flaw is that his conception of truth is contingent upon a false distinction between ‘objective’ (the outside perspective) and ‘subjective’ truth (the inside perspective). The subject-object debate has been long standing in epistemology, especially since the Enlightenment. Küng himself has criticized at length the Enlightenment view of truth as ‘objective’ mathematical certainty and acknowledges the subjectivity of all human reason, including scientific rationalism. There is no realm of rationality that is privileged to ‘objective’ knowledge, while all others must be relegated to the status of ‘subjective.’ All objects of rational inquiry are related to knowing subjects, which means that one’s knowing faculty cannot be separated from the willing, feeling, imagination, temperament, emotions and passions of the person doing the knowing. In addition, Küng has argued that the rationality of reason must be presupposed by a “prior act of trust” in order to execute any rational inquiry. This pre-scientific decision that precedes all rationality is classified in Küng’s thought as “fundamental trust.” Moreover, if finite and sin are factored into human knowing, then it is extremely difficult to say that some perspectives are “objective” and others are merely “subjective” in nature. The other major flaw of Küng’s differentiated conception of truth is that it is difficult to see how it evades the charge of practical relativistic perspectivalism. As noted above, Küng himself does not think that truth itself is relative, differentiated or pluralistic in itself. He definitely believes in one ultimate reality, which he calls “God.” He also affirms that truth cannot be different in different religions. It, therefore, defies logic for Küng to say that Christians possess a criterion for truth (Jesus Christ) that is not at the same time a criterion for truth in other religions and ideologies.

Second, Küng’s use of Hegel’s dialectical method of sublation to resolve antinomies does little to explain how polar opposites are mediated. Küng’s writings are brimming with appeals to Hegel’s dialectical method of sublation as the key to mediating antagonistic positions. There is no question that the dialectical method of sublation has the positive aim of mediation of opposite positions. Yet Küng nowhere provides a nuanced definition or explanation of the inner dynamics of sublation other than appealing to the very general formula that it involves an affirming, denying and overcoming of both affirmation and denial in some kind of nondescript mediation. Without some kind of explanation of how
antinomies are mediated and at the same time preserved, Küng’s conception of truth and his dialectical joining of antagonistic positions suffers the same problem of Hegel’s philosophy. Hegel’s dialectic conceived of God and truth more dynamically, to be sure. However, it is virtually impossible to distinguish truth from the process of human history or God from the world and human consciousness in Hegel’s philosophy. This is due to Hegel’s use of the dialectical method of sublation. In a similar way, it is difficult to distinguish an essential difference in Küng’s thought between being Christian and being human, between Jesus and the humanum, between revelation and human experience, between modernity and postmodernity, between specifically Christian ethics and global ethics, between Jerusalem and Athens. The reason is that Küng employs Hegel’s dialectical method of sublation to mediate these antinomies. In the end, it is hard to avoid the critical judgment that Küng’s employment of Hegel’s dialectical method of sublation as affirming, denying and overcoming is little more than a crude and mechanical way to sweep unraveled theological loose ends under the proverbial carpet.

**Conclusion**

There is no question that Hans Küng has made significant contributions to theology during his career. He will be remembered as one of the distinguished theologians of the twentieth century. Küng is reviewed as “a unique phenomenon is twentieth-century theology’ for “no other theologian has been published, translated and read so widely in this century; no other theologian has been the focus of such a major controversy; no other contemporary theologian has covered such a broad spectrum of theological themes.”

Hans Küng is essentially an ecumenical theologian. And it is perhaps in the field of ecumenics that Küng has made his most significant contributions. This has led John Cobb to exclaim that “Hans Küng has contributed more than any other Christian to interreligious dialogue.” Moreover, even though we have found significant theoretical problems with his Christian ethics, his global ethic project and the components by which he bridges the gap between the two, Küng remains an outstanding example of a thoughtful and imaginative Christian theologian. He desires to engage the world in order to make a pragmatic and responsible impact. He does so unashamedly as a committed Christian. Future ecumenical theologians in the Third Millennium are not only indebted to his ecumenical research, but even more to his ecumenical passion.

**Notes**

6. John P. Meier is critical of Küng’s use of the term “the real Jesus” and charges that Küng uses the terms “real,” “true,” “original,” and “historical” in a confused manner, A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1991), p. 35.
8. Ibid., p. 33.
13. Ibid., pp. 544-49.
26. Ibid., pp. 24-34.
27. Ibid., p. 36.
28. See the proceedings from the conference held at Columbia University, October 7, 1994, The United Nations and the World’s Religions: Prospects for a Global Ethic, eds. Nancy Hodes and

23. Ibid., p. 67.
24. Ibid., p. 95.
26. Ibid., pp. 181-82.
27. Ibid., p. 272.
35. Küng, Global Responsibility, p. 22.
42. Küng, Global Responsibility, p. 91.
44. Küng, “Paradigm Change in Theology and Science,” in Theology for the Third Millennium, p. 168.
45. Küng, Christianity and the World Religions, pp. xviii-xix.
31. Ibid., p. 140.
50. Ibid., pp. 1-125.