

January 1995

Book Review: "Christianity and World Religions. Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism"

Morny Joy

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Joy, Morny (1995) "Book Review: "Christianity and World Religions. Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism","
Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies: Vol. 8, Article 15.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1120>

The *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* is a publication of the [Society for Hindu-Christian Studies](#). The digital version is made available by Digital Commons @ Butler University. For questions about the Journal or the Society, please contact cbauman@butler.edu. For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact omacisaa@butler.edu.

50 Book Reviews

the ordinary world" (p.556). While most of the Christian and Hindu case studies in the volume fit into this definition, there are several that do not. Vasudha Narayanan demonstrates that within Hinduism Ramanuja introduced a new model of renunciation both within and without the world – much like the Christian mendicant orders. Ramanuja's concept of surrender (*prapatti*), especially as inspired by the Tamil poet saints (the Alvars), opened the practice of renunciation to men or women of any caste. The rejection of caste, scripture, and the impurity of women also marks the Virasaiva Lingayates as restating asceticism within worldly life, as Michael shows in his essay. Hawley finds many of the same patterns to be present in North Indian *bhakti* saints such as Kabir and Surdas. Within Christianity, Geary suggests that the Protestant Reformation, rather than renouncing human society and establishing a monastic counter-culture, aimed to transform society itself.

Studies of orthodox Christian and Hindu

monastic life include: Linge's fine analysis of the development of asceticism in the Desert Fathers (with many insightful comparisons to Hindu yoga); Cousins's tracing of the evolution of the classical Christian monastic life ideal from the 6th to the 10th centuries; Timko's fine article on "Patterns of Monastic Prayer"; Yocum's field study of a non-Brahman Tamil Saiva Mutt; and Rosenwein's cartographic analysis of the Cluny monastery and its branch operations. Notable by its absence on the Christian side was any treatment of Orthodox Christianity, especially its development of spiritual fathers and the Jesus Prayer.

In spite of my criticism, this is a most valuable volume – the best work in English on the topic to date. A glossary, bibliography, and index add to the volume's usefulness.

Harold Coward
University of Victoria

Christianity and World Religions. Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Hans Küng with Josef van Ess, Heinrich von Stietencron, Heinz Bechert. Peter Heinegg (Tr.). Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, (1986) 1993.

HANS KÜNG'S BOOK *Christianity and World Religions. Paths of Dialogue* (1993) is a reprint of a book which was first printed in German in 1984 and in English in 1986. It is not a book for seasoned participants in interreligious dialogue, rather it is an introductory text for those who wish to acquaint themselves with "the absolutely necessary knowledge about the great religions of the world: Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism" (p.xx). As such, it is more a general survey, rather than an intricate examination of the more esoteric elements of

these religions, or the finer points that figure in contemporary endeavours at dialogue.

The omission of Judaism would seem a discrepancy, even grounds for rebuke, but the volume needs to be placed in the context of Küng's own trajectory in first ecumenical, then interreligious developments. In the foreword to the second edition, Küng himself provides a brief recap of his own struggles with the Christian formula of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, since the revolutionary rapprochement introduced by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Küng reflects that in his early efforts, *On Being a*

Christian (1976) and the first edition of *Christianity and World Religions*, “world religions provided only a horizon against which to define Christianity” (p.xi). Since then, however, Küng has become involved in a vital way in actual dialogue with the members of other religious traditions and indeed, his efforts have been directed towards the articulation of a world ethic – to which he believes that the world religions can subscribe. The book that articulates this position is *Global Responsibility: In Search for a New World Ethic* (Crossroad, 1991). And the first book that reflects this quest with reference to a major world religion is *Judaism* (Crossroad, 1992).

Thus it is interesting the Küng has chosen to reprint *Christianity and World Religions* rather than pursue the quest of a world ethic with reference to Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. For the book is somewhat anachronistic. Rather than allow a representative from the tradition involved to speak on his/her own behalf, Küng consults a leading German scholar from the discipline of History of Religions (*Religionswissenschaft*) to make the presentation. Now while such an approach cannot fault the scholarly credentials or erudition of the scholar involved, in the age of dialogue as well as of postcolonial and orientalist critique, it does seem somewhat insensitive, even in an introductory primer, not to allow representatives of the different traditions their own voice. Perhaps in 1986 it could be regarded as an unfortunate (maybe unavoidable) oversight, but today it makes one question whether the Eurocentric, if not Christocentric, bias can ever be overcome. For though Küng states, “there can no longer be a credible Christian theology that does not take seriously the challenge of world religions”, in this book the parameters of a certain Christian approach loom large as decisive for determining exactly what a new world ethic would be. One wonders how much dialogue is actually taking place between the different religions, and on whose terms.

While I am well aware that the present aim of dialogue is not to formulate some watered-down inspirational statement or vague generalities regarding shared ideals and values that does not represent the real differences between religions, I still wonder that the agenda being promoted is one that reflects the concerns and problems of the so-called first world. My misgivings regarding such an outcome result from my reading particularly the sections on Hinduism in this last edition of *Christianity and World Religions* and also the initial declaration “Towards a Global Ethic” that resulted from the 1993 Parliament of World Religions in Chicago.

First, with regard to the sections on Hinduism in *Christianity and World Religions*. There are four sections by Heinrich von Stietencron under the headings: I. What is Hinduism? On the History of Religious Tradition; II. World and Deity: Conceptions of the Hindus; III. Man and Salvation in Hindu Religions; IV. Religious Practice: Rite, Myth, and Mediation. To each of these sections, Küng writes a response, motivated by the principle “that nothing of value in the other religions is to be denied, but neither is anything of value to be uncritically accepted” (p.xix). This statement is set against the background of a needed dialogue in *mutual* responsibility where the participants acknowledge that no-one has a monopoly on “ready-made” truth, but that each is en route to the discernment of an “ever greater” truth.

It is a particularly interesting exercise to watch Küng at work in his interpretation of Hinduism, as well as in his selection of the points of comparison/contrast between Hinduism and Christianity. The inevitable mystical/prophetic distinction is elaborated, as is the myth/logos element and the popular (read folk) celebrations versus the more restrained, if not eviscerated, formal practices. There is also the perennial problem of polytheism as opposed to monotheism. Küng is at pains to demonstrate that such terms are not diametrically

52 Book Reviews

opposed, and he is careful to demonstrate commonalities, as in his discussion of Mary and the cult of saints in Christianity with its affinities to the *bhakti* tradition in Hinduism. But it is at best a selective reading, focusing on heterogenous elements in both religions. All this, however, is a preliminary to Küng's primary issue: "the pivotal question for the future is whether religion, either Christianity or Hinduism, will prove to be a force for social as well as spiritual change" (p.266). And it is in this connection that Küng makes perhaps his most remarkable observation of the book, that Hinduism, because of its predominantly mystical orientation, should not be disqualified from such a development any more than Christianity, because of its essentially prophetic character, should be considered as particularly suited to such a program.

My reservations have to do with the fact that despite his criticisms of Christianity, Küng seems to advance a view that resonates much more with the values of Christianity as the standard bearer of the new global ethic. He sees Christians as bound to witness unconditionally to all that Jesus represents: "service to one's fellow men and women, regardless of hierarchies and caste systems, for readiness to be reconciled with others, transcending the boundaries of one's nation, religion, race, class, or family; in short for universal nonviolence, selflessness, and love" (p.280). The epitome of this stance is the Sermon on the Mount, which Küng sees as having resonances, if not actual appeal (as in the case of Gandhi) to the neo-Hindu reformers of this century.

It is this position, too, that informs the declaration *Towards a Global Ethic*. Admirable and necessary as such a document may be, given the evidence of violence and hatred that continues to burgeon on a world-wide scale, there remain innumerable, maybe even unsurmountable, problems to Küng's well-intentioned proposals. While Christianity's ancient legacy in its ideal form may appeal to the better instincts of those raised in its rubrics, what is to say that a declaration of these ideals, in the name of all humanity, can prove any more effective today. Christianity's sordid history does not provide much of a basis for hope. Despite some exemplary exceptions, the odds seem stacked against a renewed global mandate. Finally, I am also troubled by the language of rights and obligations, and its Enlightenment corollaries, that pervade *Towards a Global Ethic*. In the West, the interaction of the individual and the collective continues to be one beset by extremes of fanaticism and (litigious) confrontations. Legal sanctions appear as impoverished as ethical injunctions to mitigate the intolerance and selfishness that appears endemic to a capitalist world order. Perhaps this is unduly pessimistic, and I wish Hans Küng well in his quest, but I cannot help but feel that the West has had its chance, and it is now the turn of others to contribute their insights on their own terms.

Morny Joy
University of Calgary